落第騎士の英雄譚（キャバルリィ）

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GA文庫

Illustrations

Novel Illustrations

Prologue: A Town in the Country of Snow

「Listen up, you guys. Alcohol is an adult's drink. That means whoever drinks alcohol is an adult.」

In a snowy country in Eurasia, under a dark gray winter sky. In front of a church shed, a red-haired ten year old little girl held an emerald-green alcohol bottle in her hand and raised her voice.

「Once you guys taste this, you won't be kids anymore! You'll join the ranks of cool adults like us. And cool adults would never betray their friends! They'll never abandon weaker people! This alcohol is that kind of an oath between friends. Are you ready for it!?」

At those words, the two five- or six-year-old boys standing in front of her stood straighter and answered in loud voices.

"Yes we are!"

"Good! Then show me your readiness!"

"Okay!"

With their answers, the two boys held forward wooden cups in their hands. Into each of those cups, the red-haired girl poured a little bit of alcohol. The two boys sipped the alcohol that had been poured for them at the same time, and swallowed without hesitation.

「Wh-Whoooooaaa…」

And they spat it out simultaneously.

「Wh-What the heck was that!? It's so bad!」

「My throat's burning…!」

The two fell to their hands and knees in nausea. At the two underneath her gaze—the red-haired girl laughed cheerfully with a great voice.

「Looks like it's still too early for you! We'll have another trial next year, so be protected by me and Alice for another year!」

「Ugh….」

「Becoming an adult is hard, huh? Timur….」

While on the verge of tears, the two boys wiped their mouths with the snow at their feet. Watching over those two, the red-haired girl and the boy of around her age both showed parental smiles.

「Ha ha ha. There's still a long way to go before you become cool adults.」

There was a youth whose ash-blonde hair looked somewhat gloomy. At a glance, he was a shabby child who looked like he was dirty with soot and mud, but upon careful observation, he was a young boy with horrifyingly beautiful features.

This was the childhood of he who would someday call himself Nagi Arisuin, and enter Hagun Academy.

Arisuin—no, Alice—turned back from the two boys to address the girl.

「All things considered, you're a wicked adult, Yuuri. Timur and Condra are both only six, and you knew they couldn't drink something like that, right?」

In response, the girl gave a proudly evil smile.

「It's fine. Trying to overreach will make them bolder.」

Her name was Yuuri. Like Alice, she was a child of the streets, and the leader of this team that held their headquarters in the church's storage shed.

Yuuri, the girl who had a lively personality full of unyielding spirit.

Alice, the boy who had a delicate personality full of gentleness.

They were two diametrically opposing people, but they had one thing in common. It was—the thought that they had to protect the weaker children who could not survive on their own.

So they cared for the younger street kids more than themselves, and raised those children. Yuuri had a father's dependability. Alice had a mother's affection. Even though they were children themselves, they took on these roles splendidly.

—And what was happening now was a rite of passage for that team. The kids who drank from the green bottle of indecently strong liquor, they were being accepted not as children, but as adult friends. They had no parents. They had no adults to depend on. So they had to overreach as much as possible, to become adults as quickly as possible.

Yuuri, who thought that, had held the ceremony. But it didn't matter what kind of reason she had. There was no way children drinking alcohol was—

「Hey! Yuuri! You're feeding young kids alcohol again!?」

「Oh crap! It's the nun! Everyone hide!」

Having been discovered by the frightful Sister who managed the church alone, Yuuri and the two younger boys fled, scattering in all directions.

The boys escaped instantly at their leader's command. Their trust in Yuuri was deep. Well, even if that was so….

「Hold it right there, you wicked brats! If you don't come back here, you'll have no soup today!」

「We were caught up in Leader's ways against our will.」

「It's all Leader's doing. We weren't bad. That's the truth.」

Before the promise of warm soup, their loyalty was only as strong as tissue, but….

「Y-You bastards—!? I'll remember this—!」

「Ha ha ha.」

While letting out a smile at that bunch of youths, Alice stood. The day was drawing to a close. It would be time for work soon.

Suddenly, at that moment.

「U-Umm... big sister Alice!」

Three girls came from inside the storage shed. They were children around five, six, and seven years old. And the seven-year-old Anastasia—the eldest among the kids besides Yuuri and Alice—stood before Alice with her white cheeks blushing as red as apples.

「H-Here….」

She nervously presented a hand-made scarf. It was something that she had made over the last few days from knitting wool she had gotten from the Sister, after learning from the skillful Alice. So knowing without a doubt that this was something she wanted him to see if she had done well, Alice took it in his hands.

「Oh my. You've knitted it beautifully, haven't you? You must have worked hard.」

Praising the craftsmanship, he tried to return it. But the girl pressed the scarf back into Alice's chest firmly.

「It—It's a present for you, big sister!」

「For me?」

Anastasia nodded forcefully.

「Because you're always… working… in the cold, doing your best….」

「….I see.」

Understanding Anastasia's feelings, Alice wrapped her hand-made scarf around his neck. Mysteriously, it felt warmer than the usual bargain-sale scarf he used.

「So warm…. Thanks, Anastasia.」

「Ehehe....」

Receiving the thanks, Anastasia broke out in a delighted expression. It was a smile that warmed not just his body, but his heart.

—Speaking honestly, their daily lives were miserable. With only the storage shed that the Sister was lending them, it was impossible for two ten-year-old kids to care for two boys and three girls. There were jobs to be had from the criminal gangs in their hometown, but after the government took away taxes, there was almost nothing left. For food, there was only the soup that the Sister made everyone once in a while, and hard bread stored in plastic bags. Those were shared among everyone. Naturally, one could hardly say it was enough to satisfy growing children, and everyone was always hungry.

But even so, these days were a blessing for Alice.

Compared to the amount he ate when he was alone, this was less. In order to raise the children, he had to do more work. But—if he compared these days of being loved to those where he lived alone, stealing and scavenging, he was much more content with the time spent here.

Living close to precious friends. Could he want anything more? No, there was nothing.

If tomorrow, and the day after that, could be just as peaceful—

Ahh, if only—

Chapter One: Training Camp

Part 1

It was the last third of July. The rainy season had ended, and now was the season of soaring white cloud columns. The school period of rushing through selection battles was over, and Hagun Academy had entered the summer break. Some students went on vacation, and many went back home, so there were few people left at school.

Were the only ones left those who wanted a carefree summer holiday in Tokyo? Were they those who wanted to train themselves with the academy's ample facilities? Or maybe, they just couldn't go home because of troubles waiting there.

…However, Ikki Kurogane was surprisingly not among them. Similarly, his friends and his sister were also not there. Why was that?

It was because the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was drawing close. The Sword-Art Festival opened in the middle of August. And for any sports tournament, attending a training camp was the usual thing to do. Hagun held a training camp each year, of course. That would be ten days of focused training at a training lodge in Okutama. Professional mage-knight lecturers who've participated in the King of Knights league had been called to this, so not attending would lead to a huge difference in growth, come the day of the Festival. Ikki and the others not being at school was because they were participating in the training camp as the representative team, or as assistants.

—However, the place was not Okutama. That was due to the Okutama Giant uproar, mentioned previously. That matter remained unresolved in the end. Afterwards, there were no reports of the stone giant that had attack Ikki's group appearing again, but

of course none could say they were satisfied with the security.

Therefore, Board Chairman Shinguuji made an earnest request to Kyomon Academy for permission to hold a combined training camp with Kyomon's representatives at their own lodge in the mountains.

Part 2

The Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion.

A girl who came from a faraway land to the country of samurai for the sake of strengthening herself, she was now in the middle of a fight she requested, here in the mountains after arriving from Tokyo.

In the mock battle arena at the Kyomon training camp, crimson flame and golden lightning were clashing furiously, creating great sparks.

The one clad in a crimson blaze and wielding a gigantic sword was Stella. Power and speed—hers was high-performance motion with what could be called the greatest strength, and overwhelming magical power.

The knight named Stella Vermillion could not generally be said to have any weaknesses. She had remarkably high offensive ability, but her true essence was the height of her overall power. In offense, defense, and speed, she was equipped with a balance of exceedingly high qualities in every possible ability and talent. That was why she was an A-Rank knight—

However, there was someone in front of her eyes right now, an enemy exchanging sword blows with her, enduring her fierce attacks head on. At this moment, that enemy could do so with a skill that was worthy of being her opponent.

A regular person would surely have his body destroyed opposing Stella's great physical strength directly. Instead, this opponent had flexible defense that dispersed the power of her descending sword, and a defense that certainly did not only guard, but held alacrity gave back immediate counterattacks.

This was the kind of opponent Stella was facing, but it was not unexpected. Why? Because the one serving as Stella's opponent, participating as a volunteer coach along with the rest of the student council, was none other than Hagun's student knight—Touka Toudou, the "Raikiri".

"Shh—!"

In the middle of that sword fight, Touka displayed her technique. In the instant that the two sent sparks from their steel, she used the impact of her parry to angle for Stella's wrist. In a movement reminiscent of Aikido, Stella's body leaned over greatly. The shock was evaded, and the sword blade glided past.

"Kuh!"

Naturally, Stella was also a top-grade knight. Though her blade was pulled in, her balance did not break. Her well-trained lower body held Stella firmly to the earth.

However, the move certainly created a gap between them. That gap—Raikiri didn't overlook it.

Immediately, Touka returned her Device, *Narukami*, to her black scabbard, and she took a wide stance, pouring lightning energy into her scabbard.

In that moment, a shudder ran through Stella's spine. What attack would shoot from that posture? She knew.

The Noble Art—*Raikiri*.

Touka's trump card that destroyed the enemy with the unsheathing. Although it had suffered one loss, Raikiri could boast of overwhelming power in close range.

Although she was called the Crimson Princess, Stella had no technique that could be used against Raikiri. If might and range counted, she could win grandly with *Katharterio Salamandra*, but with speed as the main determinant, she would lose.

So when Touka took the stance for Raikiri, Stella could only fall.

But….

This is what I was waiting for!

Not succumbing to the shudder that raced through her spine, Stella kicked against the ground to dash out of close range.

Indeed, having fought up to now in a close-ranged sword clash, it could only have led to Raikiri being used. Raikiri was a sword draw that emitted intense electrical energy through imbuing electromagnetic force into the sword blade. The explosive propulsion brought forth by intense electrical energy was something Touka herself could not stop. It was a technique that could not cancel the unsheathing once started. For that reason, Stella had purposely put herself into Touka's range, and then retreated back out of that range once Touka took the stance for her trump card, inviting Touka to strike at nothing.

…*But….*

The trump card did not come out. Touka stood still in her sword-drawing position, and stared silently at Stella who had escaped. At the discernment which saw through her smallest motions, Stella leaked a sigh of admiration from the bottom of her heart.

After all, such a simple plan wouldn't go through like I want, right?

Tricking the user to spend her trump card uselessly? Anyone could've thought up a tactic on this level. It was a typical countermeasure against Raikiri. Of course Touka had faced countless opponents who used that tactic. There was no way she'd fall for such a simple lure.

—In that case.

I should use a plan that only I can use, right!?

Boom! Stella kicked the ground a second time, taking another huge step backwards. She took a distance of more than ten meters away from Touka. It was beyond the range a sword or a spear could reach. Long distance—it was the range for only bows or guns, or magic.

Yes. Stella was not a knight whose forte was only in close combat. At this long distance, Stella was still in her element. Because she was, among these currently recognized knights, the one who boasted of the greatest magic capacity.

At long range magic combat, those who held high magic capacity held an overwhelming advantage. Though Touka also had a technique for fighting at long distance, Stella's ability in magic combat exceeded hers noticeably.

Because of that, Touka dashed forward hurriedly to close the distance. However, that decision was slightly slow.

"Haaaa!"

Stepping outside Touka's range, Stella poured more power into the *Dragon Breath* surrounding her Device, *Lævateinn*. Devouring that magic, her sword's fiery aura grew in light and heat. As the flames covered the point of her sword, Stella faced Touka who was charging from the front.

"Take this! *Dragon Fang!*"

It became an attack.

Lævateinn—the flame that surged from the point of her sword in a flash took the shape of a living creature.

It was—a dragon. A dragon with a long, serpentine body. That fiery dragon opened a jaw full of teeth and struck down upon Touka.

Touka managed to just barely sidestep that burning dragon's jaw. Instantly, the dragon twisted around to bare its teeth against Touka again.

Lævateinn was no ordinary fiery weapon. With fangs that burned through everything, for the sake of taking a bite of the enemy, it was an attack that would follow its target to the ends of the earth. Shaking it off was impossible. Touka didn't have a single means to counter it.

An average Blazer had no chance against *Lævateinn*. The magic that came from Stella's overwhelming capacity all carried enough power to deliver certain death. If a challenger started a fight with an inadequate offensive, he'd find himself beaten at his own game. So Touka—

"—Raikiri."

At the approaching fire dragon, she responded with the strongest and fastest attack she had.

—She had nothing else to offer. And that was what Stella was aiming for.

I have you!

The slash of plasma collided with the Dragon's head. In that instant, Stella dashed forward with all her strength, and drew near Touka with a burst of speed.

Touka had fallen into Stella's trap, and used Raikiri. Right now, she was unable to interrupt her technique—which mean she was completely defenseless. This was the moment when the fight would be decided.

For a breathless instant, Stella crossed the distance with explosive

force, and gave a knockout blow. It was a vertical downward slash. Right now, Touka who had just used up her killer technique wasn't able to do anything—

"Eh…?"

Shouldn't be able to do anything. Stella's attack should definitely have hit.

But in that moment, Touka showed a movement that Stella didn't anticipate.

She had certainly recovered from Raikiri—but… her recovered stance had not stopped the technique.

She used Raikiri's momentum to turn her body, and attack twice...!?

A devastating propulsion born of a sword draw based on extreme electromagnetic force. It was a second attack using high speed rotation.

Yes, Touka had completely seen through the tactic Stella was going to use. So Touka had—purposely used Raikiri, in order to induce Stella to jump in by making herself look defenseless.

And that scheme had worked flawlessly. Stella's abdomen, where Touka had aimed at for the second blow, had been mowed down by Raikiri—

"Ah…guh…."

Illusionary form—against a sword that cut through endurance directly without injuring the flesh, Stella fell to her knees.

And in the next instant, *Narumaki* fell precisely on the back of Stella's neck. It was the moment that decided the battle.

"…I didn't hear about you having that kind of counter-move."

"It's because this is the first time I've used it in combat. Attacking the enemy's weaknesses is fundamentally correct, but now that you're at the same level as the best in the nation, your opponents

will take advantage of your own weaknesses without remorse too. To win against opponents of this class, it's critical not to let yourself be read like that."

To the junior who was looking up at her, Touka explained the reason for this defeat.

"You're not quite there yet, Stella-san."

And she gave a very composed smile.

Facing that, Stella couldn't help but feel frustrated.

"Uuu…."

She uttered a moan that sounded quite regretful.

Part 3

"Oh my, the Crimson Princess lost?"

"Yeah, no way."

Two girls watching the confrontation from a distance both sighed. On their arms were yellow bands proclaiming them to be newspaper club members; they were the newspaper club of Bunkyoku, who had come to the training camp to cover the news there. The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival training camp was an opportunity to collect information on other schools' teams that didn't happen often. It was a vital event for newspaper clubs of all the schools, so the two from Bunkyoku had come from faraway Kyushu to write an article about the rumored princess knight, Stella Vermillion, but—

"It's a little bit disappointing!"

"Raikiri won so easily! Even though I got hyped about it."

"So in reality, she's weak! That means there's no story here after all."

—they wanted to write news about Stella that would be noteworthy, but her loss would mar the dramatic impact. Bunkyoku's newspaper club was suffering a letdown.

At their mutterings… Kagami Kusakabe, who was wearing a similar newspaper club armband and had heard them from where she was standing slightly distant, murmured in amazement.

"Sheesh, where were those Bunkyoku people looking?"

"I know, right? Being drawn here by the results they themselves wanted, they're clouding their own eyes to actual reality. They're not worthy of being called reporters."

The one who spoke was Nagi Arisuin, who had watched the mock battle between Raikiri and the Crimson Princess from his place standing next to Kagami. The two of them knew what was going on, because they had watched many of Stella's fights. They knew the outcome of this fight was not a sign of Stella being weak like Bunkyoku's observers had said.

However—among other different schools, there were also people with discerning eyes there. This referred to the boy and girl who were watching the fight a bit far from where Kagami and Arisuin were standing.

"Whoa—what an amazing fight! You could totally charge money for it!"

"Hagun's participants are all excellent this year. Isn't that right, Kusakabe?"

Kagami smiled at the two people who spoke while approaching.

"Yagokoro-san and Komiyama-san, you were watching too?"

"Of course. If there's a mock battle between Raikiri and the Crimson Princess, any reporter would catch wind of it."

"Entirely so."

After greeting the two, Kagami's shoulder was poked by Arisuin who was standing aloof behind her.

Kagami turned her head to ask why, but Arisuin inquired first.

"Kagamin, who might these two be?"

Being asked so, Kagami realized that this was the first time Arisuin had met the two.

"Ah, I should introduce you, huh? This girl is Yagokoro-san of Bukyoku Academy's newspaper club, and this boy is Komiyama-san of Donrou Academy's newspaper club."

"Pleased to meet you, Arisuin-san."

"Pleased to meetcha."

"I see, they're both people in the same business as you."

"That's how it is. We're wearing the same armbands, after all."

Certainly. Arisuin nodded in agreement. Yagokoro approached him after the straightforward greeting.

"Well, there were a lot of rumors, but meeting you in person, you really are a lady-killer, huh? You can seduce just with that face, right?"

"Yagokoro, that's rude."

To Yagokoro who said such a thing while staring fixedly at Arisuin's face, Komiyama who was standing next to her poked her with an elbow.

But Arisuin wasn't very bothered. He smiled.

"Ahaha. I'm fine with it. Both flowers and women should be loved."

"W-Women…?"

At the words Arisuin spoke, Komiyama started shaking as if he could not wholly understand their meaning.

"Oh, Alice-chan is that kind of person. Don't worry about it, Komiyama-san."

"I-I'll leave that alone then…."

"What, Komiyan didn't know that Nagi-san is like that? Your data collection has been shallow, huh?"

"Kuh. I didn't comprehend how far his fetish went…."

Kagami thought those words were very much like Komiyama. Even as reporters, there was something called preference. Yagokoro and Kagami preferred to write news articles that mixed facts about the contenders with their human sides. In contrast, Komiyama was the

more objective type who nails down the facts of the news while staying away from dramatization, similar to a government broadcast. That kind of reporter probably wouldn't check up on things like sexual inclination.

"But Nagi-san, since you're a representative contender, is it okay for you to watch other people fight so casually?"

"I had a bit of luck, so I made it this far. Originally, I didn't have any interest in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, you know? Although it's a bit unfair to the people who lost to me. Anyway, I only came to this training camp to chaperone my roommate. That's why I'm taking it easy."

"Luck, huh? I don't think anyone can win twenty consecutive fights by luck, though."

"But since I've won, there's nothing we can do about it, right?"

"Well, people who get into the game come in all sorts, I guess. It's probably good that there's this kind of contender too."

"Oh my, you're the open-minded type of man, are you?"

"P-Please forgive me for what I said before…."

At Arisuin's chaming gaze, Komiyama paled and retreated.

While watching that strange scene, Kagami suddenly asked the two something that was on her mind.

"By the way, Yagokoro-san and Komiyama-san. What did you think of the fight just now?"

"The contest between Raikiri and the Crimson Princess?"

"Yes."

"Oh, right. To put it simply—it's at an outrageously high level."

"Which one?"

"What do you mean? Both, of course."

At that response, Kagami giggled. These two understood after all. Yes, Yagokoro and Komiyama had correctly seen through the reason Stella lost that mock battle.

"The Crimson Princess had power exactly like her rumors said. There's nothing to object about that. The offensive ability to fight blow for blow, explosive power… each and every one of her traits is perfectly first-class. A first-year student like that only comes once a decade. So in that match, the reason for her defeat wasn't because of some weakness. The Crimson Princess isn't weak—rather, Raikiri is just bizarrely strong."

"I think so too. Komiyan and I are both third-years, so we took data on Raikiri last year, but the beauty and power of her technique can't even be compared to last year's.

"Perhaps in the last year, she's been polishing her technique for the sake of beating the Seven Stars Sword King. But that's why it's still unbelievable. Even though she's this strong, Raikiri is participating in this training camp not as a representative, but as a volunteer coach. And her place as a representative was snatched away not by the A-Rank knight, but an F-Rank one."

Saying so, Komiyama turned his gaze to the edge of the training arena.

And there—was the man who had defeated Raikiri and stolen her place as representative. The Worst One, Ikki Kurogane.

As an F-Rank knight, despite having the lowest power, he was the man who had mowed through those above him until he reached the position of representative student at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

"Incidentally, what's he doing all the way at the side like that?"

"He's going to have a mock battle, I guess? Since he has *Intetsu* materialized."

"The ones near him are the Hagure sisters, who are representatives

like me."

"A mock battle… against both of them?"

"For Senpai, something like that's no big deal."

Kagami's guess was indeed correct. Right in front of the four of them, there and then, Ikki was having a one-versus-two mock battle against the third-year twin sisters Kikyou Hagure and Botan Hagure, who he had invited.

「You're miiiiine!」

Kikyou Hagure, who had materialized a spear-shaped Device, used an instant-acceleration Noble Art and attacked with a supersonic charge. But Ikki, with absurd speed against the thrusting spear, showed no panic at that state of affairs.

「Hup.」

—Stamping on the approaching spearhead, he sent it stabbing into the ground.

「Whoooaaaaah!?」

Kikyou whose spear had been jammed into the ground flipped upward as if pole-vaulting, her own momentum sending her into the air.

And when she flew over Ikki…

「Eh?」

She crashed into her sister Botan, who had been aiming at Ikki's back with a handgun Device and was about to pull the trigger.

「Eek!」

「Noooo!」

And the two were sent rolling across the sandy surface of the ground. Worried, Ikki called and chased after them.

「Are you two alright?」

「Ow ow ow… yeah. I'm fine. How about you, Botan-chan?」

「Uuu… I think I skinned my knee.」

「Shizuku.」

「Yes, leave it to me, Onii-sama.」

At Ikki's voice, Shizuku who was waiting at the side patched up Botan's skinned knee with healing magic. And at the same time, Ikki spoke to the Hagure sisters.

「Kikyou-senpai, you use speed, but there's not much advantage in doing so when you're wielding a spear against me, who has less reach. Doing so relinquished your own reach advantage. I think you should consider offensive tactics a little more. Also, entering your own ally Botan-senpai's line of fire is—」

He pointed out the problems in the fight just now, saying what Arisuin, who watched the situation from a distance, was thinking.

"This mock battle, it feels like Ikki is training the two of them."

Because the mock battle had been far too one-sided. Well in reality, this mock battle had been training that the Hagure sisters had asked Ikki for from the beginning, so Arisuin's discernment was correct.

"…Training, huh? At any rate, he was overwhelming. The Worst One isn't just good at waving a sword."

"Kagami-chan, are those Hagure sisters weak?"

At Yagokoro's question, Kagami shook her head in disagreement.

"No way. Certainly you could say that the Hagure sisters were lucky they didn't have to face superior fighters like Senpai or Stella-chan, but there's no way they're weak. Both of them took down the members of the academy's top ten ranking who were stronger than them, and they're knights who scored twenty undefeated matches. If they were compared to Raikiri or Runner's High, I think they would

lose out, but they definitely have real ability."

"We've really been treating them like children, huh? They're a bigger deal than expected."

"At any rate, they're really calm about it. Training steadily at the precious training camp."

"Senpai likes to poke his nose into other people's business, so it's kind of refreshing, right?"

"Besides, in three days Ikki took down all the coaches that Kyomon brought, you know?"

The words Arisuin had uttered were true. It was the fourth day of the training camp, but Ikki had already defeated in mock battles every one of the professional coaches that Kyomon had hired.

That was why he had no opponents to do mock battles with. Even Raikiri who was the strongest coach in the training camp right now had already been defeated by Ikki in a real match.

"Well, I suppose in this situation where the honor of the sponsor, Kyomon, has been affected, they're calling for a special coach for the Worst One, huh?"

"I wonder who will come? Chairman Shinguuji and Saikyou-sensei would probably rush over here, but since it's both time for Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival preparations and the KOK championship match, it's probably impossible for the two of them to come from Osaka. On the other hand, the coaches who've been beaten are all ranking members of the Japanese national league, so there's no point to calling up ordinary knights."

"If they summoned people of that class, it would be an unusual instance where the opponents wouldn't be fit for the participants' level, right?"

"Yeah, really. Hagun is amazing this year. Everyone in Bukyoku is in danger too."

Yagokoro praised Hagun's representatives in a lamenting voice. But

in response, Kagami gave a wry laugh of disagreement.

"Once again, you're playing around, pretending like you're already going to lose. Miss Bukyoku, don't you have some unreasonable people entering the Festival?"

Bukyoku was prestigious even among the prestigious schools, having monopolized the winner's podium for multiple years in a row. The strength of the team that included the current Seven Stars Sword King, representative Yuudai Moroboshi, was renowned not only in Japan but also overseas.

However—leaving aside that one member of the renowned representative team, there was a man who had announced himself as a Bukyoku representative suddenly by submitting his entry at the last minute. That man was the only A-Rank knight among Japan's students, who held the nickname "Sword Emperor of Wind", Ouma Kurogane.

"That A-Rank knight entered the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival as a third-year even though he didn't participate during his first or second year. Bukyoku's representatives were really surprised at seeing this for the first time."

"I was surprised too. I also thought that man would definitely not participate this year either. I guess his entry is Bukyoku trying to put as much power as possible into the tournament?"

The Crimson Princess, an A-Rank knight, had come from a foreign country.

The Worst One had defeated Raikiri with one slash.

From other academies as well, this year had an abnormal ratio of unknown first-years.

Before the competition had even started, it seemed to already be in an uproar. It looked like there was no choice but to field Ouma, who was an even higher class of knight than Moroboshi, the Seven Stars Sword King. Wasn't that the reason the entry was made? This was what Komiyama and Kagami conjectured.

But Yagokoro shook her head.

"No, no. The Sword Emperor of Wind isn't the type to listen to the school, you know? To begin with, he doesn't come to school, so who would know how to contact him? Entering was the decision of the Sword Emperor of Wind himself. Because of that, we were also completely surprised."

"Then it wasn't at the academy's direction?"

"Nope."

"Is that how it is? Well, even if it was his own decision, it was probably what the academy wanted too."

"That's likely. So they hurriedly arranged a selection battle with the sixth-ranked Shibata-kun, to see who would be the representative."

"And Ouma-san won that?"

"I honestly can't call it a match. If we say the opponent was a bad fit, we can leave it at that."

Yagokoro's face was colored in grief as she answered. Shibata had probably suffered a cruel defeat. However—

"It may have been bad for Shibata-san, but the whimsy of the Sword Emperor of Wind is good news for us news clubs, right?"

"Entirely. To honor that, we'll give extravagant space to the story."

"There are a lot of voices on the Net who're looking forward to a confrontation between the Crimson Princess and the Sword Emperor of Wind."

"That's understandable. Anyone would want to see a match from the A-Rank student brought up by World Clock and the Yaksha Princess.

A legendary fight between those two had already become a hot topic. That fight was strangely being billed as a confrontation between Hagun and Bukyoku, east versus west Japan, and was

already rousing the public mind.

"…Well, it's a shameful story for us Donrou who are also in Tokyo."

"But I'm also interested in the matter of the Worst One's rematch with Sword Eater, you know?"

"Honestly, that's my only saving grace. We're also putting our expectations on him this year. His behavior is problematic, but the Sword Eater's close-ranged combat sense is top notch. …But based on that, this year's competition is focused on… the Worst One, after all."

Though he had anticipation for how his fellow schoolmate Sword Eater would perform, Komiyama's reporter senses told him that the dark horse of the competition this year wasn't Sword Eater but Ikki, and he said so.

"With the rumors of a private relationship after his confrontation with the Crimson Princess, and distinguishing himself more and more on the center stage with his victory over Raikiri, one wonders what other national champions this famous F-Rank will cut through. …Those kinds of thoughts, anyone might indulge in similar ideas. Off the record, it seems there's a lot of people who want to put together a special report on the Worst One before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival begins."

"The younger brother of the Sword Emperor of Wind, who defeated the Crimson Princess and laid low Raikiri with one slash…. Well, that might be natural treatment."

Yagokoro agreed.

Near her, Kagami smiled secretly. She was happy for the person she had recognized, who she had always been following around and observing. It was confirmation that she had a good eye, but more than that, she knew the circumstances of the knight called Ikki Kurogane who had surmounted all kinds of obstacles to reach this point, so it made her extra happy.

Well, it's not good to push other team members aside."

But Kagami decided it couldn't be helped, given her connection to Ikki.

After all, there's no girl who wouldn't cheer for a boy that sincere and earnest."

So it couldn't be helped. Yeah.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, when she returned her gaze to Ikki, Kagami saw someone at the edge of her peripheral vision. It was an ash-blonde young lady, who was watching Ikki from the sidelines like they were.

"Hey, isn't that Kyomon's 'Icy Laughter'?"

"It's true. Did she come to scout out the Worst One?"

"I'm off."

"I'll definitely get her comments—wow, Komiyama-san is already gone!"

"Wait for me, Komiyan! I won't forgive you if you monopolize this! Nagi-san, I'll come back to interview you, hey!"

After getting Arisuin's agreement to a shrewd stopgap promise, Yagokoro ran chasing after Komiyama.

But Kagami didn't follow them just yet. She stayed with her companion, Arisuin. After all, it would be bad to leave him behind like that, so Kagami asked Arisuin.

"Alice-chan! I have to go too, so will you wait for me here!?"

But Arisuin didn't answer immediately. He was looking downward with a thoughtful expression, as if his thoughts were somewhere else.

"…Alice-chan?"

"Eh? Ah, sorry Kagamin. I was lost in thought for a moment there.

What was it you said?"

To Arisuin who had responded after the second time, Kagami relayed the matter of interviewing Icy Laughter again. Arisuin quickly returned an unconcerned smile.

"Of course it's fine, Kagamin. Good luck with the interview. I'll be here."

"…Yeah. See you later, then!"

Saying that, Kagami ran after the two who had already left.

As she did so, she thought of what Arisuin had been concerned about. Why had he been lost in thought? It had already been several months since they met, but this kind of thing had never happened before. Arisuin failing to listen to what another person was saying? Not even once.

Could it be, Alice-chan is nervous right before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival too?

If not that, then the topic they were discussing before Arisuin had gone quiet—the talk about Ouma Kurogane, maybe he was concerned about something there?

But after pondering it a little, Kagami thought—

Well, everyone has a blank moment here and there.

In any case, she had to seize the chance to interview Icy Laughter. Kagami immediately put her doubt out of her mind. Fortunately, Komiyama's interview had only just started by the time Kagami caught up.

"Hello! I'm Komiyama from Donrou's newspaper club. Mikoto 'Icy Laughter' Tsuruya-san, after seeing the mock battle just now, what do you think of Ikki Kurogane, the Worst One—I mean, the Crownless Sword King? He has surpassed the nation's best eight, like yourself, right?"

A sudden interview. But a member of the media would probably be

used to confronting even someone as important as Tsuruya. In this not very surprising situation, she didn't make an unpleasant face either.

"Hmph. You shouldn't be so hasty, Mr. Reporter."

With a well-rehearsed expression, she gave a slightly meaningful smile.

"What are my thoughts on him? There's no point in me talking about it, I think. For us knights, only the outcomes of battles matter. And the stage of battle is already in place—whether he surpasses us or not, it will become clear soon enough. In that way, cruel as it may be, it will be expressed more clearly than with words."

Announcing this, Tsuruya let slip a small gap between her lips. That smile, colder than anything, left the three interviewers shaking with chills racing through their spines.

"Haha. Well, excuse me—"

Stating her intentions to the three who had become frozen in horror at her smile, Tsuruya turned toward the exit of the practice arena. Her simple answer made it very apparent to the three reporters, but her dignified departing back also left not the tiniest doubt in her confidence and strength.

"That's the dignity you'd expect of the best eight, huh?"

"What an impressive presence. I thought I was frozen a little."

Yagokoro and Komiyama let out voices of admiration. Kagami had the same feelings, but her faith in Ikki was greater. Because Ikki had brought down Sword Eater who was also one of the best eight, and even Raikiri who was one of the best four.

Because of that, there's no need to lose my composure.

But still—

The nation's best eight weren't a bunch of people as easy as Kagami

thought. Tsuruya, who had left the practice arena, had spoken to a fellow representative schoolmate on her way out.

"Ah, Mikocchan. What did you think of Hagun this year? If it's you, I think you can win without trouble."

She responded with a smile that embodied the name Icy Laughter.

"Absolutely impossible."

It was a clear declaration. Yes, Icy Laughter Mikoto Tsuruya was much stronger than Kagami and the others thought. And so, she could measure the strength and capability of herself and others accurately. For that reason, far away from the three in the arena, the true self of Icy Laughter could be perceived.

She knew she could not win against the Worst One.

"I mean, he was even surrounded by three professional knights, you know? It's impossible for me."

Speaking with a lamenting voice, Tsuruya leaned against a nearby wall. In her ears, she could hear the hustle and bustle of the practice arena.

「Hey, isn't that Torajirou Nangou!?」

「The coach they brought in for the Worst One is the God of War! That's way too extravagant!」

"Impossible…."

Slumping against the wall, Tsuruya slid down to the ground. She only wished for one thing.

"Ahh, why can't I avoid fighting against that gang of monsters…!?"

—In this way, the heretical existence known as the Worst One had become well-known.

Yuudai Moroboshi, the Seven Stars Sword King.

A-Rank knight Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess.

Fellow A-Rank night Ouma Kurogane, the Sword Emperor of Wind.

Listing the favorites for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival championship, these were the ones who had made their names.

How far can he progress fighting against this bunch of warriors? How much of an uproar can a crownless F-Rank knight create?

Team members and spectators, everyone had started looking forward to his efforts.

Part 4

Kyomon's training camp had no schedule. The coaches that were summoned there opened special classes, but whether to participate depended on each representative's preference. This was because each Blazer has his or her own ability. The variety was great, and successful training methods were also highly divergent, so making a grand schedule framework would be inefficient. Therefore the students all decided on their own training programs individually with the help of their friends.

Accordingly, Stella asked Ikki to go running with her before dinner. From the training camp to the shopping center ten kilometers away, it was a round trip of twenty kilometers. For the two of them, it wasn't a distance that could be called much training. If one of them were asked, he or she would call it closer to relaxation.

Stella was running to distract herself from the chagrin of losing to Raikiri before. However—

"Uuu! Ahh! It really bothers me after all～!"

At a bench that the two of them were taking a break on, in a park near the shopping district that was their turning point, Stella stamped her feet in childish frustration.

"You haven't been refreshed from running?"

"I haven't! I haven't at all!"

They had gone at twice their usual pace, and she had washed her face at a water fountain in the park, but Stella's mood hadn't cleared up one bit.

—Honestly speaking, Stella had also felt it vaguely, a hunch that Touka was stronger than she was, from the incident in Okutama or

seeing the match with Ikki. But now that this outcome had been forced in front of her eyes, it was vexing.

"I mean, I knew before going to the fight, but that person is really too strong."

"Touka-san's close range is practically at the upper boundary of power, you know. Charging with a frontal attack is a difficult tactic to use."

"But Ikki, didn't you make use of that tactic?"

"…Well, I had no choice. At any other distance, I'd lose."

Her sweetheart smiled humbly, and Stella felt a tinge of envy. Against Raikiri, who she couldn't do anything against, this boy smiling with a mild demeanor had won by breaking through from the front magnificently. Touka and Ikki's one-cut match: that instant exchange had been burned into Stella's eyes. It was splendid, and at the same time frustrating. She still didn't have enough experience to reach him.

"At any rate, for that kind of person to only reach the top four last year, Japan's level is really high."

"Well, there's always the luck of the draw in who you face at a tournament, so I think there might be those even higher than the four that Touka-san is a member of. At the quarterfinals, there are certainly those who forfeit because of grave bodily injuries."

"That's why I don't have an excuse for losing! There are already two people who've beaten Touka-senpai, you and the current Seven Stars Sword King, so I can't be be losing here. My goal is to beat you and everyone else to become the Seven Stars Sword King. Plus—there's an opponent I'm a little worried about."

"An opponent you're worried about?"

"The one who's from Bukyoku Academy, just like the Seven Stars Sword King. Ouma Kurogane."

The moment that name left Stella's mouth, Ikki's expression

stiffened noticeably. At that reaction, Stella was convinced.

"Like I thought, he's the same Kurogane as you and Shizuku, right?"

"Yes. He's my older brother."

"I didn't know that you had an older brother. No, in the first place it was also the first time I learned that there was an A-Rank knight like me among Japan's students."

"Well you see, for the two years that he entered knight school, no, even the five years as a student in middle school, his situation was almost completely unaccounted for."

"Eh? Did he disappear?"

"No, that's not true at all. It only happened occasionally, but it seems he got in touch, and he was seen in public too. But it seems he would go somewhere for a day or two. And he did not join any competitions for five years. He was champion in the primary school league, and there were many people who took notice of him, but with five years of not showing what kind of talent he had, society lost interest in him. As to what kind of attention he has, I think Shizuku has more at the moment. So it's only natural that you wouldn't know about him, Stella."

"I get it. If he's been absent from public matches for five years, that would only be expected."

But if that was the case—

"I wonder why someone like that would reappear here? Ikki do you happen to know anything about it?"

Stella asked Ikki this, and he shook his head.

"No, I have no idea."

"Even though he's your own brother?"

At those words, Ikki gave a troubled and bitter laugh.

"On top of me being forced out of the family, my brother Ouma had also been forced out as well, so we never had any contact. To me, he's someone even more distant than Father. Because of that, he's someone I truly don't know at all. It's just that, well, if I had to say what impression I have of him, he was an incredibly stoic person."

"Stoic?"

"Being born meant becoming strong… he was that sort of person."

"…Isn't that like you, Ikki?"

To Stella who said what she was thinking, Ikki shook his head again.

"You can't compare me to that. Ouma had no interest in anything besides getting stronger. He had no interest in a younger brother weaker than himself. He had no interest in a younger sister weaker than himself. He had no interest in a father weaker than himself. … He even declared in an interview that his reason for not entering the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was because 'no opponent there is worthy of me'."

"He's sure has a lot of confidence in himself."

"But he has the strength to match. And for my brother Ouma who cares about nothing except getting stronger to appear at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, he surely has no other motive but to become stronger. So—this is only my guess, but I think Ouma's goal is you, Stella. An A-Rank student like himself. You're not someone he'll come across in the world often. If I were him, I would definitely be thinking about fighting you."

At those words, Stella also agreed. It would be a lie for her to say that she wasn't interested in a fellow A-Rank student. If she could, she would try to have a match with him. The likelihood that her opponent would think the same was high.

"By the way Ikki, from what you've seen, what do you think Ouma's strength is like?"

"It's exactly as he said."

"Like he said?"

"'There's no opponent there worthy of me.'—his true strength matches his boast."

At Ikki's air of tensions as he stated this, Stella felt a chill in her spine. In a word, what Ikki had said was that Ouma Kurogane had a strength where, to say nothing of Raikiri, he could even disregard the current Seven Stars Sword King.

The tension that had spread from Ikki's words, it had him personally remember the pressure of his brother taking part in competition. Just speaking of the past when Ouma was a boy, he was no ordinary person. And if Ikki had to meet such an enemy in competition—

For Stella as well, it was becoming less and less a situation where she could lose to someone of Raikiri's level.

"I've decided. Before this training camp ends, I'll absolutely become stronger than Touka-senpai!"

The training camp had five days remaining. With one mock battle a day, today meant a total of six fights to do. She would win more than she'd lose. In a loud voice, Stella declared her goal. And since Stella was able to give a precise goal, her body throbbed from her conviction. She was already not in the mood for resting in the park. Stella bounced up from the bench, and hurried Ikki.

"Ikki! Let's go back to the training camp quickly! After dinner, we'll do more training—"

But at that moment.

Growl~

An extremely cute noise came from Stella's stomach. Furthermore, whether there were any kids playing outside at this hour, the park was deserted, which meant the sound reverberated indiscriminately throughout the area—

"Ha ha, what an adorable sound."

She was laughed at by Ikki. Stella's face reddened like an apple in embarrassment.

"I-I can't help it! I was moving a lot today! And it's just before dinner right now—"

"Yeah, that's true. Becoming hungry is proof that you've been working hard, Stella. It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"R-Right. It's good that you understand."

"But enduring hunger that long isn't good either, so let's go get something to eat."

Saying this, Ikki stood and took the hand of Stella who was red-faced and staring down in shame.

"Ah."

Stella was surprised at her hand being caught suddenly. But Ikki didn't pay any attention to that.

"If we go toward the shopping district, we should be able to find something, so bear it for a moment."

With a smile, he pulled Stella's hand and started walking.

Part 5

The shopping district at dusk was favored by middle school students on summer break and housewives there to buy dinner for their families. Into the midst of that, Ikki and Stella walked hand in hand.

As they did so, they head whispering voices.

「Aren't those two the princess of Vermillion and the child of the Kurogane family who've been in the news lately?」

「Ahh, those stories about the princess being cheating on and molested?」

「I heard those were false rumors.」

Topics about the association between the two of them came up one after another, and it wasn't just Stella, but also Ikki whose face was now widely known in society. It wasn't just their faces either, but the details of their relationship as well. That was why the two of them stood out as they walked, even though it was unpleasant.

「Look, look! They're holding hands! It's really true that they're going steady!」

「I mean, looking at her in reality, that princess is outrageously beautiful.」

「How nice… I wanna go out with a girl like that….」

At the inquisitive gazes piercing from all around them, Stella's ears grew a little red. She had become reasonably used to being stared at in school as a couple, but being looked at as girlfriend and boyfriend by people off-campus was still embarrassing no matter how she thought of it.

Guessing that Stella was thinking this, Ikki spoke.

"Hey Stella, if you're embarrassed, we can let go with our hands?"

It was consideration after noticing that Stella was blushing due to the gazes from all around them. But Stella—

"I'm… n-not embarrassed… at all…."

—told a lie.

She was certainly embarrassed, but she really loved holding hands like this.

"If that's true, then okay. But don't strain yourself."

Did Stella understand the subtleties of that situation? Ikki smiled a little bit, strengthened his grip a little bit, and once again started walking and pulling her along.

Looking at Ikki's face in profile, Stella thought,

"What's this? Ikki has changed a little."

The boy Stella knew as Ikki Kurogane was by any standard not what one would call assertive. Like herself, it was the first time he had liked someone or dated someone, so it was a relationship where the two of them timidly stepped into the role of sweethearts.

But recently, the atmosphere around Ikki had changed—he had become unusually proactive. For example, him grabbing Stella's hand just a while ago. They had enjoyed that sort of physical contact before, but up until now, it was hard to say who was usually the one to put a hand on top of the other's. But lately, it had been different.

This hand is… solid… firm…—

It wasn't a spontaneous touch, but rather Ikki's assertive grip. And right now, he wasn't worried about the gazes around them but was holding her hand with dignity. Knowing Ikki's usual virtues of care and sincerity, Stella who was slightly anxious couldn't help but be

shocked by this change. What exactly caused this change in his mentality? Therefore, Stella spoke to Ikki about this openly.

"Hey Ikki, you've changed a bit recently."

"I've changed?"

"You've become… a little pushier, a little more assertive than before."

…A little more manly, a little more impressive….

At Stella's statement, Ikki showed a surprised expression for an instant. And immediately, he blushed and scratched his jaw, then answered.

"…I guess you noticed, Stella?"

Ikki's answer showed that he was aware of his own change.

"Sorry. I've been trying to be more courageous."

"I-It's not like I dislike this! I was just wondering what caused it."

"I don't think it really had a cause…."

At the questions being piled on him, Ikki started his explanation that way.

"It's just that, ever since my proposal to you, I've felt an attachment to you growing strong inside that surprised even me. A feeling that I can't do anything about. That this person is my precious girl."

He spoke of the reason for the change that Stella wanted to know about. The confession he made after the fight with Raikiri, it had become a huge turning point for him. Up to that point, Ikki had intended to love Stella more than anyone else, but after their strong feelings had been confirmed with exchanged words, the desire to her for himself had grown stronger than can be compared to what he felt before. The feeling that he wouldn't surrender this girl to anyone had grown stronger.

As a result, a self-consciousness had been born inside of him. A man's strong self-consciousness that he would protect his woman. And that self-consciousness had given Ikki an assertiveness he had not had up to now.

"To the point that I want to embrace you right this minute. …But I don't think saying that is very chaste, right?"

Ikki spoke what was in his heart, though he sounded a bit embarrassed. At Ikki's confession, Stella felt her chest pounding like a drum.

Ikki….

That throbbing, it was a sweetness emerging from so deep inside her chest that it was itchy.

Why? The reason was obvious. The one she loved was declaring something right now that words wouldn't be enough for.

You're mine. I won't let anyone else have you.

And at the same time, the overwhelming pressure from their surroundings fell away.

She's my woman. Don't touch her.

At this realization, Stella had to hide her softening cheeks.

Ikki, you're so cute….

Honestly, it was adorable. Even though he was immature, he was trying to monopolize his woman with all his might. She couldn't help it when he was that cute. Ikki probably wouldn't enjoy being thought of that way, but as far as Stella was concerned, Ikki was so cute that she was getting giddy.

She had to reward this no matter what. As someone's girl, as his girl. So Stella—took his arm with her own hand, and pulled him into an embrace.

"S-Stella?"

"If we do this, everyone will understand better that I'm your girl, right?"

Smiling, Stella pressed Ikki's arm to her cheek. She no longer cared about the stares falling on her from all around. More than such trivial things, the boy who was trying to monopolize her with all his might had created a far stronger feeling.

But for Ikki, who was trying to hold her hand and walk with a prim face to the end, Stella's act of clinging to him had created a situation where he couldn't calm down. Though since he was the one who said he wanted this, he couldn't tell her to get off because he was embarrassed either.

"Th-That's right. Good idea. Yeah…."

Ikki continued to walk while staying as calm as possible, but his cheeks were glowing with embarrassment, and the hand he was holding Stella with had become damp with sweat.

"Hehe…."

At such a bluff, Stella couldn't help but find him charming.

…Somehow, I'm really happy right now….

With her mouth falling into a smile, Stella entrusted the walk entirely to Ikki. Anyone around them who saw this would probably think they were an idiot flirty couple. Stella seriously figured that it wasn't something they could do anything about. After all, they were in love.

Hold me firmly, my prince.

This embarrassing thing didn't leave her mouth, but was only whispered inside her heart.

But at that moment—

"Hmm?"

Ikki's steps abruptly stopped.

Did he find somewhere to eat? That was her first thought, but Stella instantly realized this wasn't the case.

Ikki's line of sight was in the opposite direction from where they were going, and his face had a very grim color.

Part 6

"What's wrong?"

"…That person just now."

Ikki, looking straight at the back of a man dressed in work clothes who had passed them, answered like this.

"Wasn't something strange about the way he was walking?"

"Maybe he was hurt?"

"No—"

Ikki thought that at first too, but….

It's probably not the case.

Inhaling a shallow breath, he raised his concentration. Staring at the departing backside, he took in the man's physique, height, and width. He compared the muscles attached to that frame to his preconceived notions on how bodies were put together. Yes, the man was walking strangely. The steps were not going left and right in a regular way. But there was no feeling of injury or other hindrance. He could see that the various joints were driving the man forward normally.

But it was so lifeless. The man was walking as if his body was out of order.

I can see there's something wrinkled at its side. The right pocket?

A hand was thrust into the right pocket at the waist. In the wrinkles gathered in the work clothes, there wasn't just the hand. The right hand was clutching something, stored away in the pocket. It was

somewhat long and wide. For example—a survival knife, or something like that.

…From his clothes, he might be an electrician.

It was common for an electrician to carry a knife in order to peel the tough outer covering of electrical cables. The knives that electricians used were very large, but his own knowledge of such things was meager, and maybe this was just an individual's preference. But just as he thought this, Ikki noticed it clearly for an instant.

From the brim of the cap the man was wearing on his head, something inside of it glimmered. It was the bloodshot eyes of a wild beast focused on its prey. They were very much the eyes of someone full of hate.

It might be the bloodshot look of someone who was just lacking sleep. In addition, the thing in the pocket might also have been an ordinary work tool. Both of those possibilities were perhaps more likely than Ikki's worst-case guess. But—there was no way he could put the worst case out of his mind. His premonition wouldn't lessen.

"…Okay."

"Ah, Ikki, where are you going!?"

"Wait for me a bit."

Ikki pulled away his right arm that Stella was holding, and he rushed over to the man who was dressed in work clothes.

He could start with talking, and find a way to check what was in that pocket. If he was just making a rude misunderstanding, that would be good. He'd just need to apologize. If his apology wasn't accepted, well, he could accept getting into a little trouble. Since that was the case, if he could allay the worst-case thoughts that had stolen his attention….

Thinking that, Ikki called out—and at that moment, the man in the work clothes suddenly stopped walking.

The place he stopped was the shopping district's tenth street. It was in the middle of very busy foot-traffic. Why did he stop in such a place with nothing to look at? The answer was—

"The hell!? What're you doing stopping in the middle of street, old man!?"

The moment some middle-school aged kids bumped into the man, it became obvious.

"Heeee—"

Leaking a weird whistling shriek, the man moved. He started to pull whatever was in his pocket out with his right hand quickly. In that unending moment, Ikki beheld time flowing past with his focused concentration and enhanced motion perception.

He had correctly identified the thing glittering through the tiny gap he had peeked through into the man's pocket. It was a blade's edge glaring and sparkling savagely, a thick survival knife. In the middle of the intersection, there was only one reason to pull out such a tool.

The worst possibility that Ikki had suspected had come true. And as he felt his prediction hitting the mark, Ikki moved.

With his concentration slowing the world down around him, he was faster than anyone. Lunging forward through the pedestrians coming and going, Ikki ran to arrest the man's hand holding the blade. The distance to the man was less than five meters. The man hadn't yet pulled the knife out half-way, and the group of middle-schoolers in front of the man hadn't yet realized the danger.

I can make it…!

With Ikki's speed, there was plenty of time. Running, he could strike the man from the back and render the man unconscious. Before the knife-blade was fully pulled out, he could settle the matter. Though it might create a small ruckus, he could stop a tragedy from happening. It was all from what Ikki immediately sensed in the moment they passed each other by, but thankfully Ikki's quick-

wittedness had caught it. Indeed, up to now it was all what Ikki considered the worst possible possibility.

But the next moment, something he hadn't foreseen occurred.

"Waa! Wait, wait! Don't do it!"

The high voice a girl who sounded at her wit's end resounded, and before Ikki could arrive at where the man was, that owner of that voice clung to the man's arm.

Eh…!?

It was timed just before the knife could be taken completely from the pocket.

If a normal person wasn't staring from the start at the pocket the man was vigilantly watching over, she wouldn't have the timing to interrupt that action with only common reflexes. Only someone who had the kind of physical ability that Ikki regularly honed could do it. That was why Ikki had not foreseen anyone having such timing. Someone attacking the man when his guard was down perfectly. And all the more untimely, it was a girl who was next to the man, who was now in the way of Ikki's attack.

He couldn't charge. Having no choice, Ikki immediately canceled his body's acceleration and came to a halt.

Meanwhile, the situation progressed. The girl, with a somewhat high voice, yelled at the man who had a look of shock at the abrupt interruption.

"You can't, mister! Even if your company laid you off or you're under tons of debt, to consider taking someone with you in suicide would be…!"

But her yell was heard by everyone in the vicinity—

"H-Hey! This guy has a knife!"

"Eh—Whoa!"

"Eeeeek! He's going to kill someone!"

Though the thing hadn't yet been fully pulled out of his pocket, everyone could understand the implication of having it. The shine peeking out from the man's right pocket caused an uproar. While the people closest to him recoiled, and the contents of the bags they were carrying spilled all around, everyone raced to get away from the intersection. In the middle of that, the young girl who had grabbed onto the man's arm…

"Since you failed to do what you were trying to do, won't you come with me to the police? Something like this would make your mother in the countryside mourn, you know. It'll be fine. As long as you're alive, good fortune will come your way eventually, right!?"

Smiling with a beautiful face that was only sweating just a little, she spoke with a soft voice. She was probably trying to calm the man.

But the man did not accept it.

"You fucking brat!"

"Uwa!"

The man who had been hindered roared with an angry voice, and shook off the girl with all his might. The slender girl was easily heaved away, and fell on her back.

A shadow fell over her. It was the shadow of the knife that the man was swinging down with an extremely upset expression on his face —

Wh-What should I do!?

At that moment, Ikki who was watching the chain of events from within the flow of people fleeing the area hesitated in deciding his next action.

Properly speaking, it was the kind of situation where he shouldn't hesitate, but go in and save the person. But—there was one factor that made Ikki hesitate. It was none other than the girl who had barged into all of this.

No—this was no girl. He didn't misread that charming voice or those pretty features. But the clothes were—Kyomon Academy's boy's uniform.

And he knew that face. He hadn't recognized it at first, but after looking at it carefully, he remembered. After the selection battles ended, his classmate Kagami had shown him a list of this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative students. This person's face was in a photo.

Ikki had forgotten the name, but this was a Blazer who was at a level of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. In that case—

That kind of person wouldn't barge into this without a plan.

That kind of person wouldn't appear nonchalantly and spout cliche words from a police drama. That kind of person must have some means and ability to take control of the situation. And since he didn't know what kind of ability this boy had, there was a possibility that he could be a hindrance if he intervened. Ikki thought that about the boy.

So I have to leave this situation to him, right?

But as Ikki came to that judgment, the boy with blond hair facing the descending knife—covered his head and yelled out.

"S-Someone save me—!"

You had no plan—!?

While screaming in his mind at the boy's cry for help, Ikki immediately began to move. He didn't have enough time to rush in anymore, but the belongings of the fleeing passengers were scattered all over the ground.

Ikki swung one foot forcefully at a tube of lipstick, aiming to hit the swinging knife.

"Guah!?"

Taking an unexpected impact, the knife flew out of the man's hand

and fell to the ground. At the same time, Ikki charged up and struck the man in the face with his fist.

"Gah!"

The man fell face up on the ground with blood flying from his nose in an arc, and he stopped moving. Ikki's fist had rendered the man unconscious with one blow.

To anyone watching, it was probably a truly skillful performance. But…

"Ha… haa… haa… haa…!"

The performer himself was sweating frantically.

Too close…! This person really didn't think before putting himself out there…!

If Ikki hadn't flown to the boy's aid, the boy would undoubtedly have been killed. At that moment, the boy had been defenseless against the knife swinging down on him. To say nothing of martial arts, he hadn't even used a Blazer's magic to protect himself, only panicking, freezing up, huddling up against the blade-wielding opponent. Honestly, the young boy's reckless behavior had been more terrifying than the man who tried to attack people randomly in the street.

"Ikki!"

"Ha… Stella. Can you call the police to arrest this attacker?"

"Y-Yes! I'll do that!"

After asking Stella who had arrived late to go inform the authorities, Ikki turned toward the young boy who was still lying on the ground. Ikki kind of wanted to make a word of complaint, but the boy had done what he did to stop a tragedy. Therefore, no complaint erupted from his throat, and Ikki asked the boy as he extended a hand.

"Are you hurt?"

"…Ah, no. Thank you. You saved me."

The boy gave a sudden smile, and offered his thanks as he took Ikki's hand.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, his eyes grew large as he looked at Ikki's face.

"…Hmm? Is there something wrong?"

"Ah-Ahh! You, are you Ikki Kurogane-kun by any chance!?"

"Err, yes. That's right, but—"

What was the matter? The moment that Ikki answered the strangely excited boy's question—

"Wow! Wow! It's really you It's really you, Ikki-kun!"

And no sooner than the boy got up, he grabbed Ikki in a hug.

"E-Ehhhh!?"

"H-Hey, what are you two doing—!?"

At the unexpected embrace, both Ikki and Stella raised their voices in confusion. But the boy continued to hug Ikki without concern for their surprise.

"I'm so moved! Even though I hoped for it, to meet you by chance like this, I'm really lucky after all!"

As if they were friends meeting again after ten years, the boy was beaming and jumping up and down with his whole body. The blue eyes wavering underneath long eyelashes were spilling tears of deep affection. The boy seemed truly and sincerely happy to meet Ikki.

But because of this, Ikki was in chaos. Why was a boy this happy to meet him?

"Who are… y—"

But before Ikki could ask, Stella was quicker. Forgetting to call the police, she who couldn't endure this any longer rushed over and grabbed the shoulder of the boy with a cute face who was embracing her boyfriend and tore him off with sheer strength. And she stood in front of the boy as if covering Ikki protectively.

"Who do you think you are!? From your clothes you look like a boy, but are you gay!? Are you gay too!? Even though we already have one such character!"

Stella scowled at the boy as if to intimidate him. The boy was astonished at being pushed away suddenly, but immediately understood that he was facing Stella who was Ikki's girlfriend, and sympathized with why she was angry.

"Ahh, I'm sorry, Stella-san. No, I'm not gay. I'm just excited and happy to meet Ikki-kun."

After this explanation, he turned to both of them and introduced himself.

"How do you do? I'm a first-year student at Kyomon Academy, Amane Shinomiya. Like you, I'm a representative at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, and—I'm a huge fan of the Crownless Sword King!"

Part 7

After that, Stella and Ikki gave their report to the policemen who came to arrest the attacker, and returned to their original goal of getting something to eat. They entered a hamburger franchise restaurant. All three of them.

The third person was Amane Shinomiya, Ikki's self-proclaimed fan who they had just met. He came because he wanted to treat the two of them for saving him from danger.

"Nnn—♪ It's my first time coming to a place like this, but this potato is delicious, even though it's full of grease that spreads through your stomach and has tons of salt."

"Eating something like this every once in a while is fine by me. But is it really okay for you to treat us?"

Ikki asked that as he sat facing Amane. To the question, Amane nodded with a big smile on his attractively cute face.

"Of course! Ikki-kun, you're a lifesaver, so I have to treat you to McRonalds at least!"

Lifesaver was not overstating it. Practically speaking, if Ikki had not intervened at that time, Amane would've lost his life. Thinking about it from Amane's side, it would probably lead to guilt if he didn't offer something like this.

"…Then I'll accept your kindness."

Sympathizing with this situation, Ikki accepted Amane's goodwill. Unwrapping his burger, Ikki took a bite. Though it was not an especially nutritious meal, the stimulating taste spreading over his tongue was pleasant.

"By the way, Amane-san was it?"

Suddenly, Stella—who had already devoured her own burger and returned her tray some time ago—spoke to Amane.

"Call me Amane. We're the same age, and having a princess put '-san' after my name is a bit embarrassing."

"I see. Then I won't use the honorific, but Amane, you're a representative member of Kyomon, aren't you?"

"Yep. That's true."

"But so far I haven't seen you at the training camp. Where have you been?"

At the question, Amane let out an "aah" and answered.

"It's because I'm not participating in the training camp. Today was the first time I came here, so it's natural that you haven't seen me."

"Is that so? Then you're thinking of participating from today onwards?"

"No. Today is also me coming to bring stuff the participating upperclassmen asked for and then immediately going back."

"How humble. Since you've already taken the effort to come, you should participate too."

"Ahaha. …Well, unlike you, Stella-san, I'm not very interested in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. It's only because I have a rare ability, even though I don't have physical strength or knowledge of martial arts, that I was chosen as a representative."

A student who wasn't interested in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival had been chosen as representative. It was not rare for such a thing to happen in academies that didn't use combat selection like Hagun and Bukyoku. So it wasn't unusual. Amane probably wasn't just saying it to be modest. In that case….

"Then against that attacker, your rare ability should've helped,

right?"

Ikki said this to Amane. In response, Amane shook his head a little, and answered.

"…Why do you think that?"

"Just process of elimination. Amane-san, I'm sure you don't have martial arts experienced based on your build and your reaction when the attacker came at you. Despite that, you had unusual timing when you seized that man's hand. Though you don't have a high level of martial arts, it was timing that showed an exceptional reaction speed. If it's not from martial arts, then all that's left is Blazer ability, I think."

At Amane's question, Ikki answered with his own ponderings. When he did so, surprise spread across Amane's face.

"Ahh, as expected of you, Ikki-kun. You were able to see through that. Such insight doesn't differ from the rumors."

It was an expression of the discernment called "shining magic mirror", belonging to the Crownless Sword King. Was Amane glad to see something like this? He stated words of happy admiration.

"But I can't tell you what kind of ability it is. My teacher said that I mustn't tell people of other schools, so I'm sorry."

"Ahh, that's only to be expected, especially for people like us who are fellow representative contenders."

There was nothing to be gained from telling the enemy your own abilities, so Ikki had no real intention of asking to hear it.

"But Amane-kun… if it's not an ability you can use to hold off an opponent, you should be a bit more restrained yourself next time. It's your life at risk, after all."

Indeed, Ikki gave candid advice to Amane from experience. With a serious look, Amane bowed his head in apology.

"Y-Yeah. That's true…. I was so upset I forgot to protect myself…. If

you hadn't been nearby, Ikki-kun, what would've happened…? I was really lucky. But—"

"But?"

"But because my luck was good, I got to see you in action, and it was so awesome~♪ You really looked cool, like a hero~♪"

In a complete change from his look of remorse, Amane's face bloomed in a girlish look of happiness. Where could one find such an optimistic person? Ikki's head was starting to hurt a little.

…Well, he's not a bad child, but….

"Oh, that's right."

Suddenly, Amane reached a hand into his bag as if he just remembered something.

"…The truth is, since I knew that Hagun and Kyomon were shaing a training camp this year, I was a little hopeful that I could meet you, Ikki-kun, so I was carrying something for you to autograph. Um… do you mind!?"

With eyes sparkling, he pulled out a gigantic piece of paper and begged Ikki.

"Eh, Y-You want me to sign on that expensive paper?"

"Yep! Please?"

"Err, it's not like I would refuse…."

Ikki was perplexed at Amane's request. After the duel with Stella at school he had become somewhat popular, so it wasn't like there weren't people asking him for a handshake or to sign their notebooks. But there weren't anybody who brought paper for an autograph so diligently. Because of that, a mere commoner like Ikki would of course become nervous. To be treated like a celebrity this way, wasn't it strange?

"Being presented such splendid paper, I don't think my signature

would be good on it…."

But Stella opined as though she was completely uninvolved.

"Isn't it fine? It's just writing your name."

"Stella… but still."

"He idolizes you to this degree. Shouldn't you respond at least that much? Besides, the value of your autograph is for the person receiving it to decide."

"Ugh…."

It was certainly sound reasoning. Amane only wanted Ikki to sign, and brought paper that reflected how important Ikki's signature was for the request, so it was unreasonable for Ikki to doubt his own value.

Therefore Ikki accepted the splendid paper with a soft "I understand."

"But I really can't do much more than sign my name. Is that okay?"

"Don't worry about it!"

So after Ikki double-checked, and Amane reaffirmed with that he should sign, he wrote his full name with unskillful characters.

"Whoa—! Thank you, Ikki-kun! I'll frame it and treasure it for the rest of my life—!"

Receiving Ikki's autograph, Amane jumped up and down in rejoicing and hugged it close to his chest. Seeing a happiness not unlike that of a child who was bought the toy he really wanted, Ikki gave a wry smile.

Did I ever think anyone would put my name inside a frame and treasure it for life…?

He was happy that someone idolized him to that extent, but Ikki who wasn't used to such treatment felt self-conscious more than

anything, and started sweating. Until he met Stella, things like praise and respect were far beyond reach for him, so perhaps this feeling couldn't be helped.

However, contrary to Ikki's mood,

"At any rate, you really like Ikki, don't you Amane? Would you tell us what exactly about him made you a fan?"

Stella asked Amane for this, and the topic turned more and more toward Ikki.

"I like how he fights. The way he's taken down every adversary put in front of him with just a sword is smart and stylish."

"But recordings of his selection battle fights weren't allowed outside of school, I heard."

"That's true, but every school has a few 'benefactors' who upload them. Especially Bukyoku and Hagun, it seems. The schools with currently popular students having matches invariably leak information. So Ikki-kun's main match was appreciated by everyone! Downloaded to datapads, broadcast hundreds of times, I've memorized his words completely! –*With my great weakness, I will break your invincibility*…!"

"Buh!"

Seeing a picture of himself reciting those words from the match against Raikiri with a sexy expression, Ikki just barely managed to cover the spray of ginger ale from his mouth with a napkin.

"That signature phrase is mesmerizing! Ah, but I like the version you gave during your fight with the 'Hunter' too!"

"L-Look, can we not listen to that? Stop? Please stop! Hey!"

"*With my greatest weakness, I'll catch your greatest strength*—!"

"Noooooooooo!"

"When you destroyed, no, caught Hunter, you looked really elegant,

you know?"

"Wa—no, please let me off! I was really stressed at the time! During the fight I was just out of sorts! So please forgive me, I beg you!"

No longer able to stand the itch of humiliation, Ikki clung to Amane. His face was so red it could burst into flame at any moment. But Amane looked dissatisfied by Ikki's restraint.

"Eh—why? I think you look really cool. Don't you agree, Stella-san?"

And Stella, who Amane was trying to bring into the conversation—

"Y-Yes, that's true. Yep. Ikki sure is cool. …Heh heh heh."

—was half crying, trying to keep the laughter off her of face.

"Stella, your words don't match the expression I see."

As he thought, Stella turned her face away rather than object. Well, since he understood her feelings, Ikki didn't object strongly. If he had to say so himself, how could he say such brazen words? Stress was a fearful thing.

But in this place, Ikki's fan continued to talk about the things that made Ikki fascinating, even though Ikki was writhing from the descriptions of his own conduct.

"Even though you look so cool fighting… I like how you look dealing with the fight even more than that, Ikki-kun."

"How Ikki looks when he's dealing with the fight?"

"Yep. My way of saying it might be impolite, but frankly Ikki-kun seems to have given up on the attributes of a Blazer, right? At least, he wasn't blessed in that way. But Ikki-kun doesn't let that show. No matter how strong his opponent is, or what the gap is between him and that opponent, Ikki-kun makes his challenges with pride and dignity. As if he believes in his own worth. That's dazzling to me."

And so Amane informed them the reason he was captivated by Ikki. At that confession, Ikki once again felt surprise and embarrassment.

He really was watching carefully, huh?

Believing in his own worth. The attitude he had when he strugged which Amane was describing, it was surely Ikki's core truth.

"Ah, haha. …Saying that in front of the person himself is embarrassing after all, right? My face is getting a little red, you know."

"…Hearing it is even more embarrassing, though."

"Haha. Sorry, sorry."

Smiling as if glossing over it, Amane left his seat with a sigh.

"Well, it's time for me to go back."

"Oh my. At any rate, we're going to the training camp, right? Then let's go together."

"There's no way I can keep up with you two running even after you've just eaten. Besides, I haven't finished buying the things my upperclassmen asked for."

Amane declined Stella's suggestion. And before he left, Amane turned to Ikki.

"Thank you for the autograph. I'll be cheering for you from the bottom of my heart that you'll push through every difficulty and take the summit of the Seven Stars!"

Yes, he gave those words of encouragement with a smile. It was very strange to hear those words of support from someone he might meet and fight in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, but it would be boorish for Ikki to retort that in the face of being shown such clear favor.

He's cheering for me in such an honest way, if I don't respond properly….

Ikki opened his mouth to thank Amane for that support with a smile of his own—

—Huh…?

At that moment, inside himself, he felt an unease—and lost his train of thought.

"Ikki-kun…?"

"…Ah, no. I'll do my best. Thank you."

After Ikki was silent for a while, he managed to squeeze out a few words in response. To Ikki who had suddenly sunk into silence, Amane showed a slightly puzzled expression, but…

"Well, let's meet again~"

Was he satisfied by Ikki's response? Amane gave a small grin and left that place by himself.

Part 8

"Hehehe. In the end, you became the type who can get fans outside the school, Ikki. It's unbelievable compared to how you were in the beginning."

After Amane left, Stella laughed delightedly as she finished off her remaining potato. In reply, Ikki nodded slightly.

"…That's true."

"And Amane seems to have quite the crush on you."

"You look very happy about that, Stella."

"Yes, I certainly am. I'm happy that the strength you beat me with has been recognized, but more than Amane expressing that so openly and heatedly, I'm happy that he recognized what's wonderful about the one I love. Ikki, you're not dissatisfied, are you? About having a fan who understands you properly and supports you?"

"…Yeah. I don't have a problem with it. …I can't have a problem with it."

"Ikki…?"

Suddenly, Stella felt a strange faltering in Ikki's response, and looked at his expression. Ikki was staring toward the exit that Amane had left through and making a somehow strained expression.

No, it wasn't—just at the level of being strained. Ikki was… clearly, visibly sweating. Even in this store with a functioning air conditioner.

"What's wrong, Ikki? You're sweating so…."

"Hey, Stella."

As if pushing Stella's question aside, Ikki asked Stella.

"In your eyes, what kind of person is Amane-san?"

"What kind of…. His manners are good, he has a cute face, and more than anything he watches you properly. A person who feels splendid, I think."

To Stella's reply,

"Yeah… that's right. One would normally think that… right…?"

Ikki's voice came out like a moan, and he furrowed his brow.

That's right. …Because there's nothing to dislike.

Amane Shinomiya. With charming looks like a girl from somewhere. With gentleness that couldn't turn a blind eye to possible tragedy, but held back an attacker even at the risk of his own life. He, more than anything else, idolized and respected Ikki. Everything about him was what was likeable in a human being.

He had to be likeable. But—despite that—

I can't hold together an impression of liking him without it breaking into pieces…

Moreover, at the moment when Ikki was returning the smiling Amane's encouragement as Amane was departing, he felt it. Against Amane's smile, he needed to exert quite a lot of effort. Amane's words. Amane's expression. Amane's puppy-like good-will. All of it was naturally likeable. All those things that Ikki thought he should like, in reality none of them resounded in Ikki's heart.

It was incomprehensible. Ikki himself couldn't understand why he held no favor for Amane. And so, that shapeless and uncanny truth clung to Ikki's heart like tar.

The eerie unease couldn't be helped, so Ikki took out his student datapad, and attempted to call someone. The phone call was connected immediately.

「Ye~s, hello! It's rare for you to call me, Senpai. Is something the matter?」

"Ah, Kagami-san. Do you have a little time right now? There's something I need to ask you."

「Sure, it's no problem. I'm just having tea with Alice-chan and the others right now. What do you want to ask?」

"Kagami-san, you haven't just been investigating Hagun, but also the contenders from other schools, right?"

「Sure, of course. I've checked through basically every school's representative team.」

"Then do you know what kind of person Kyomon's representative Amane Shinomiya is?"

「What kind of person, you say. That's a very vague question again, you know?"」

"Ah, yes, I know. Hmm."

Saying such a thing, Ikki had the same thought. It was an inquiry that was too much like what a guy would ask another guy. However, in order to sweep away that ominious feeling, wouldn't knowing anything he could about Amane be good? Since he didn't know himself, Ikki was worried for a short while. Kagami guessed Ikki's distress over the phone and opened her mouth to speak.

「Ahh, it's fine. If it's about Shinomiya-san, I can tell it's something between boys.」

"Is that so?"

「There's not much information. He's not a contender who appeared in the middle-school league. What I know is that he's a Blazer of the rare causation-manipulation system, and the story is that he was

endorsed with high opinion as a representative. How should I put it? The truth is there are a lot of those kinds of contestants this year, you know? There's a pattern of nameless first-years who don't have experience in the middle-school league being selected as representatives. So with regard to Shinomiya-san being one of them, there's not much of an impression–that you pulled out his name and asked about him makes me a little interested. Did something happen with Shinomiya-san?」

To the question being thrown at him, Ikki wavered in explaining the ominous sensation he had felt. Since he himself didn't know the reason for it, he didn't want to denigrate another person, and more than anything else, he couldn't put that ominous feeling into words.

"No, I just met him unexpectedly during my run. And because of that, I just felt like I wanted to know what kind of person he is."

In the end, Ikki dodged the question that way.

「Huh… I thought he wasn't coming to the training camp, but he did come to the mountain?」

"It seems he came in order to deliver provisions to his upperclassmen."

「In that case, I should be on the lookout and gather some information on him～I guess? Heh heh heh.」

"Ahaha… well, you can do that. Sorry for the abrupt call."

「No, no. Sorry I couldn't help much. Tell me if you figure out something interesting～」

"Yeah. Thanks. Talk to you later."

Giving his gratitude, Ikki ended the call. In the end, he didn't obtain any great information. If Kagami who always had an ear out for such things didn't know, then there probably was little information on Amane available.

"Aren't you overthinking it? You probably just have a fatally bad compatibility with Amane. Maybe you killed each other in a past

life, or fought for the same lover. Or maybe it's true from both sides."

"Maybe that's how it is."

"Well, I think everyone has someone he can't get along with."

Can't get along with. It would be good if his discomfort went that far and no more. However, since he himself couldn't explain the reason for the weird feeling he had about Amane,

"Yeah. …That's right. It's probably just that."

He had no choice but to agree. But even if he told himself to agree, he couldn't wash away the eerie feeling those false words left clinging to his heart.

What settled in his heart, that he couldn't put into words, was—an evil omen. An awfully unpleasant premonition. This is what Ikki thought as he looked at the restaurant exit that Amane had exited through: that he had met something tremendously fearsome just now.

Chapter 2: Scheming Maneuver

破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

YURI ORIKI

折木有里

■PROFILE

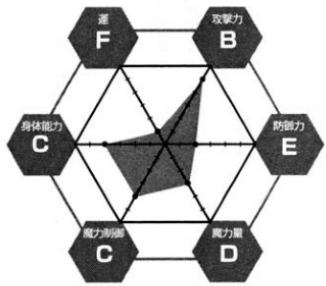
所属：破軍学園

伐刀者ランク：C

伐刀絶技：血染めの海原（ファイヤレットペイン）

二つ名：死の宣告（ジョリーロジャー）

人物概要：破軍学園教員



かがみんチェック！

今回の壁新聞では学生騎士じゃなくて、わたしたちを教えてくれている破軍学園の先生たちのことを紹介するよ！

トップバッターはわたしたちの担任教師・折木有里先生！

折木先生の能力は『痛みの共有』て、折木先生が感じている痛みを能力範囲内の敵全員に共有させることが出来るんだ。

最大射程は数キロ。一度に数百人を同時に捉えることが出来る戦略級能力だね。

患っていない病気のほうが少ないと言われるほどの先生の痛みを共有なんてされたら、並の騎士なんて一発で気絶するから、見た目は結構地味だけどかなり実用的な能力だと思うよ。

あと、相手に傷を負わすことがないから、授業を聞いてない生徒の折檻に使用することも……　((((；゜Д゜))))ガクガクブルブル

Part 1

Around the time that the sun's weak rays reached the ground of the snowy country, Alice had finished the work that the crime gang of his hometown called him for, and was on his way home.

The air temperature of the time near dawn was murderous. Against the stinging cold, the feel of the scarf that his little sisters had made and given him was heartwarming.

「Hey there, Alice.」

A loud voice suddenly descended from high. When he looked up, a red-haired girl was walking on top of the stone wall above him. While laughing at the thought that she looked just like a cat, Alice returned the greeting.

「Yuuri… it's rare for us to go back together, isn't it?」

「Yeah, right?」

Leaping down the two meter wall, Yuuri stepped next to Alice.

And hugging her shoulders, she shook with cold.

「Ooh, so cold so cold. That scarf looks really warm. How nice.」

「Ha ha, are you envious?」

To Yuuri who was sending a greedy look, he showed off the fluffy scarf.

「Lend it to me for a while.」

「Never. You'll get it dirty immediately, Yuuri.」

「Uuu…. A boy letting a girl freeze, how terrible.」

「You're only a girl when it's convenient. …But…. 」

Alice invited Yuuri closer, unwrapped the scarf around his neck a little, and pulled it over Yuuri's.

「There. This way we can both use it, right? 」

「…It-It's a little embarrassing…. 」

「Isn't it fine? Embarrassment makes you even warmer. 」

To Yuuri who was showing a rare girlish blush on her cheek, Alice gave a mean smile.

The two of them walked side by side along the deserted neighborhood's brand new street. Along the way, they chatted about the rite of passage with the two younger boys from before.

「The way those two wanted to become adults, it was pretty impressive, wasn't it? 」

「We picked them up around two years ago, huh? But they're still brats. When we were their age, we were a lot more strong-willed. 」

At the mention of their younger selves, Alice made a bitter expression.

「…I don't really want to remember those times. 」

「It was harsh, huh? The stab wound I got from you is still there, you know? 」

「We're the same as far as that goes. Because I lost to you, I'm still below you, so don't play innocent. 」

While pouting sourly, Alice reminisced a little about the old days.

Alice and Yuuri were both orphans with abilities. Because they had half-baked powers, it took a lot of blood and time getting to the kind of calm relationship that existed between them now. The number of fights that went almost to the death because there weren't enough food or beds to go around was more than they could

count on one hand.

But both of them had grown tired of those days, the kind of empty days where they stole from others to benefit themselves. So the two of them ended those barren days by drinking that alcohol and making an oath.

If everyone could be as strong as they were then, many children surely could have been protected. That was why they were no longer using their powers to steal, but to care for people beside themselves. In that way, they had become cool adults.

Since then, they had lived as they had vowed over alcohol. Pulling together a team of powerless orphans, the two watched over them all.

「…It's certainly true that we also tried to kill each other along this street, huh?」

「Yeah, the way this place is now is much prettier compared to back then.」

Exactly as Yuuri said, the street that the two were walking along was covered in beautiful white stone, and the buildings along the road had been coated in new paint. The places they had competed in, the familiar road of neglected stone pavement which even cars could not traverse properly, was a place where a traveler who didn't know anything would have all his possessions stripped away in a matter of seconds.

And there was a reason for the change. That was—in places here and there, there were emblems stretched out on the walls, each of five colored rings.

「What a big festival. Since people come from all over the world, this place can't be seen as dirty, probably.」

「A disgraceful place, huh…?」

Yuuri let out a dark mutter. In response, Alice guessed what was in her heart immediately.

「—The government people came again, right?」

「Yeah, yesterday.」

…Although it was poor, Alice liked his current life. Even if it was modest, it was good as long as everyone could live. But recently, the Olympics had drawn near, and the world was wildly enthusiastic, so his livelihood had been pushed into the shadows.

Hunting the homeless.

The country, the city, they didn't want to show disgraceful things. The adults who thought so held a conference in a nearby neighborhood and began evicting the homeless and the street children.

They offered no care to those they evicted. They just drove them out with rods and kicks. And the people who were doing this hunting had marked Alice's team.

「Those bastards. If they only came for you and me it'd be fine, since we have abilities.」

「It's out of the question.」

「Yeah, I guess. What would happen to Natasha and the others? Since even the Sister knows that much, she can only keep turning them away. It's not pleasing at all, those government people.」

「Well, looking at it from their side, us sponging off the tourists would be very shameful, right? It would embarrass them.」

However, Alice and the others couldn't say "yes, we understand" and leave. Being forced to go somewhere they didn't know left or right from during this remarkably cold and severe season was no different from a death sentence.

「If Natasha and the others could be sent to an institution at least, I wouldn't mind leaving, but—where would we live by ourselves?」

「That's also difficult, huh…? If leaving was that simple, people like us wouldn't be idling about in a place like this.」

As Alice said, homeless children were a social problem the entire country had to carry. Therefore, there was no way to save them. No, it may be possible, but at least the administration had no intention of doing it. They were busy building the street that wasn't being used yet, or the art museum with no display items, and had nothing left for looking after street children.

So they had to live by their own power. And in order to live, they couldn't let themselves be driven out of the neighborhood in this season. However—

「But ultimately, I think it's about time for it.」

Yes, Alice muttered his true opinion. In response, Yuuri also nodded.

「……We've received a lot from the Sister, huh? We can't give her any more trouble, after all.」

The Sister who had sheltered them in the storage shed was a good person. While taking care of a penniless church in a rundown district by herself, she provided them with soup out of her own funds. They had not lived even ten years, but she was the first person the two of them had met who was so kind. But… for that reason, the Sister had been yelled at by the city government, and the image of her being belittled and abused was something they could not bear to see.

「Then it's decided!」

Suddenly, Yuuri pointed a finger at the sun ascending into the sky to Alice's side.

「Alice, after this winter ends, once it becomes a little warmer, we'll all leave this neighborhood. Let's go south. I'm already tired of cold places.」

You're pointing to the east, though….

She was probably pointing toward warmth, but Alice didn't say that as he nodded.

「…Yeah. That's fine. Let's find a warm town.」

In truth, Alice had also been thinking of speaking to Yuuri about looking for a warmer place to move to. The younger brothers and sisters who they looked after had grown up enough that they had the strength to go. If they can just get through this winter, they can surely make a long-distance trip.

「We'll aim for the equator!」

「We're traveling for the first time, so let's take it a bit easier.」

Alice said it in amazement, but his expression was not as annoyed as one might think. He was also dreaming of starting a journey in the spring. It would be nice if there was a new city, a place in the southern countries that was easy to live in for everyone.

But—in the end, that promise of finding a new place to live would not be fulfilled.

Disaster would suddenly strike, and his modest happiness would be sharply broken.

Suddenly, next to the service road that Alice and Yuuri were walking, a black automobile passed, and the old person sitting in the car's back seat gave an exhortation to his secretary who was driving.

「…The renovation of this area isn't proceeding well, is it?」

「Eh? I don't believe that's true, sir. The pavement of the service road has almost been repaired, and the repainting of the walls is also nearing completion.」

「In the corner of the street just now, I saw something squalid.」

「…The street children?」

「You can cover the town with Persian carpets, but having such seedy brats running around on them would render them completely

pointless. It would affect our good name if beggars were cluttering the city during the Olympics.」

「But street children are a problem all over the country, so what exactly can we do…? And the area around here is the territory of a group led by that Yuuri kid, and though most of them are very young children, the two leaders both have abilities, so it's quite troublesome for our personnel to deal with them….」

「Cowards. Why are they trembling over nothing more than two brats?」

「…Then, you want to have the police evict them by force?」

「Don't be ridiculous. Since the beginning, the police chief has been aiming for the seat of mayor. If he gave such an order, his opponents would gleefully use negative campaigns calling him on such inhumanity.」

「Then… what should we do?」

The secretary, to the boss who was doing as he pleases without caring for the hardships in this place, asked this in a bored tone. In response—the old man spoke as if it was trivial.

「Send rubbish to clean up rubbish. We can even save on labor.」

He said so as relaxed as if he was making coffee.

Part 2

Late at night on the second-to-last day of Kyomon and Hagun's combined training camp, it was unfortunately raining. Not strongly enough to be a storm, but large powerful drops were coming down and hitting the windows noisily. While listening to it as if it was a rather delightful sound, Hagun Academy's newspaper club chief, Kagami Kusakabe, was in the accommodations kindly lent to the newspaper clubs of all the schools by the nearby institution. She was sorting through the data she had gathered during the training camp period.

Under the small light of the desk were many basic documents, the contents of many interview transcripts, and the information on each school's team traded between the newspaper clubs. The thing displayed on the laptop resting on the stack of documents was information on other schools' training camps collected by her staff members.

Checking all of that information from a big-picture perspective—the trends of the seven schools during this training period and the analyses of their respective fighting power—would allow her to come to a conclusion about the number of special cases during this Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

—It was the kind of work that would lead to discovery.

The imputus for this was the telephone call from Ikki who had been worried about Amane Shinomiya.

Speaking frankly, Kagami wasn't very interested in Amane Shinomiya. There were surely many mysteries among the teams. The powers they held were often not clearly known. But that was not just limited to the nameless newcomers who had no experience from the middle-school league. To begin with, the schools didn't go

around blabbing about their Blazers' abilities, because there was no benefit to revealing one's own team members' information.

Moreover, this year there were several participants, not even including Amane, who had not been experienced representatives during the middle school years. Because of this, Kagami hadn't recognized Amane as more than one of the nameless newcomers, so she hadn't felt like investigating him deeply.

Ouma Kurogane, the Sword Emperor of Wind. Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess. And Yuudai Morboshi, the current Seven Stars Sword King. There were contenders who attracted more people's attentions.

However, Ikki's phone call had caused interest in Amane to sprout in a corner of her mind, so Kagami had searched through the data on the seven schools to casually satisfy that interest. As a result—

"…What is… this…?"

Kagami was astonished. Though the mountains of Tohoku were cool even in the summer, beads of cold sweat dripped down her back. What was in front of Kagami's eyes was Amane Shinomiya's school grade report that she had gotten at great effort. The results of coursework-mandated mock battles were there.

Six battles, six wins—six victories without combat.

Kagami had collected the mock battle summaries for many contenders as part of the newspaper club, but she had never seen a record as weird as this.

No, wait, if I'm talking about things I haven't seen before….

She's probably seen a battle record as odd as Amane's before, right? What she hadn't been paying attention to up until now, Kagami was forced to remember.

…Entering the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival himself as a nameless newcomer. There's never been anyone like that before.

It was an ordinary trend. If she thought of how things have been up to now, wouldn't that be expected? People who had power would desire everything they see in the world. In this world, there were many influential people who chose to be representatives in their first year, but…

It's as if someone had gathered all the people in the world who hadn't shown up until now.

Suddenly, Kagami felt it. As if she was in the process of realizing something preposterous. And that realization was preposterous even for someone who wasn't a student.

But because of that, I can't let it go.

Because she remembered that sense of discomfort, not investigating would be….

She was a reporter. Therefore Kagami gathered up all of her materials and questioned the discomfort within her. The information about all the seven schools' representatives. The schools' board members, and the members of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival steering committee. Furthermore, the list of sponsors collaborating with the administration. She examined the big picture of all the components of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

—And after a few hours had passed, it was the dead of night. Kagami Kusakabe had come to a conclusion. The exceedingly high abilities that she had polished as a reporter every day, they had arrived at the truth she had come to realize.

There's no mistake.

Kagami stared at the list of names in this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, the names of the seven schools' representatives, and moaned.

"…Among the seven schools, there's… an extra one…!"

At that moment. Burning heat penetrated Kagami's back.

"—Eh?"

In front of the documents Kagami was looking at, she could see a dark gray knife emerging from her chest for a moment.

Kagami knew the shape of the knife that was illuminated by her desk lamp.

…I… knew… it."

The knife that emerged from Kagami's chest was the Device called *Darkness Hermit*. And the owner of that Device was….

"A…lice…-chan…."

Mustering the last of her strength, Kagami shifted her focus behind her. There, she saw a cold face that looked nothing like the schoolmate she saw every day.

Her schoolmate—Nagi Arisuin opened the lips on that cold face. Without a trace of emotion, a voice emerged from those corpse-like lips.

"You're a little bit too smart."

And then he withdrew the knife, making a squelching sound. At the same time, Kagami's body fell to the floor among the mountain of documents.

You can't….

She didn't have any strength to lift her body or run away. The forced blackout from a fatal wound delivered in illusionary form stole away Kagami's consciousness.

Senpai… Stella-chan… watch out….

So Kagami prayed. From her throat that could no longer cry out, she tried to at least deliver her hopes.

This year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival… is hiding a monster…!

And so, Kagami Kusakabe fell into darkness.

Part 3

Crouching on one knee, Arisuin observed the fallen Kagami. She had entirely lost consciousness. With her like this, she would probably stay asleep for an entire day.

"How unfortunate. If Kagamin was just a bit duller, we could've been friends for a few more hours."

The conclusion she made…

「Among the schools, there's an extra one.」

What Kagami had realized—was certainly on target. At the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival this year, as she had concluded, there was a power maneuvering secretly beneath the surface.

The name of that power was—Akatsuki Academy.

It was a new school based on a huge organization with the sole purpose of destroying the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. At present, there were seven students. They were almost all members of the huge organization that established Akatsuki Academy, but they were elites of the underworld society who employed the terrorist group Rebellion. They've snuck into the seven schools, and had already taken control of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival framework. In order to create chaos in the tournament, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival had been conquered, because this new power wanted to take out the League which supported the Seven Stars.

Kagami had realized this situation. Because she had made that realization—she had been attacked.

"It's really too bad, but it can't be helped."

Suddenly, the student datapad in his pocket vibrated. It had been putting out that notification many times now, but Arisuin had been watching Kagami from the shadows, so he had ignored it.

What Arisuin pulled from his pocket wasn't Hagun's student datapad, but a different school's tool. Though no one was displayed, he knew who the message was coming from. The only one who would use this datapad to contact him was the man in charge of communications for Akatsuki Academy. Only the Pierrot, Reisen Hiraga.

"What is it?"

「Ah, I finally got you. Since you didn't pick up at all, I thought you didn't like me.」

"I have such thoughts often, I think."

「How harsh.」

To the sounds of clattering laughter coming from the phone, Arisuin's eyes narrowed in distaste. There was no possible way he could like this man's voice, because although it was a tone that could easily calm someone down, the laughter seemed to appear and disappear frivolously as if sneering at everything.

「By the way, why didn't you pick up immediately?」

"There was a bit of trouble."

"Oh? What kind of trouble?"

"It seemed that a girl of Hagun's newspaper club started to suspect our operation, so I silenced her."

「…And how much did she suspect?」

Slightly, but clearly, the tone from the phone grew stiffer.

Arisuin picked up one of the documents Kagami had been looking at before she fainted, and replied.

"Donrou Academy's Yui Tadara.
Kyomon Academy's Amane Shinomiya.
Rokuzon Academy's Sara Blacklily.
Bunkyoku Academy's Reisen Hiraga.
Rentei Academy's Rinna Kazamatsuri.
Bukyoku Academy's Ouma Kurogane.
Hagun Academy's Nagi Arisuin.
Enough to list these seven names, including yours and mine."

「…That's certainly something.」

"Since I don't know any of our members except for you who communicates with me and Ouma-san who is a guest, I can't confirm that this list is completely correct. She seems to have predicted our intentions, so for the moment I've made her quiet, but… I wonder if this list is on the mark?"

「Alas, forgive me, I can't tell you the details of our members just yet. Right now, what's there is just a pointless list. Well, it's coming close to the festival so it'll be soon. Even though I don't like it, I have to show my face, so I'll introduce you then. …Still, that list hits three out of seven correctly. I wonder how she figured it out?」

"Looking at the data here, she apparently investigated all of the representative contenders of the past. Other than the guest, all of our personal histories were fabricated. They wouldn't hold up against a professional's thorough investigation."

「I see, I see. In other words, it was the ineptitude of the documentation people? Well, we'll deal with those responsible for that later—hah, your action was truly appropriate. That's what I expect from the Black Assassin. How reliable! Oh, by the way, how will you dispose of our perceptive little mouse?"

"I've only stunned her—though if you wish her killed, I'll do so."

Arisuin had not a trace of hesitation in his voice, even though his target was a girl who he had been friends with yesterday. That cold, blade-like dispassionate voice confused Hiraga who was on the other end of the line.

「Oh no, no! Killing would mean having to hide the evidence. After tonight, the whole world will know about Akatsuki Academy, so it's fine just to imprison her somewhere for the day.」

"I understand. It was just a small joke. …If there is anything else you need, you'll contact me?"

Arisuin hurried Hiraga to the point as if he was going to cut the call. From the beginning, this was an unpleasant conversation. He had no intention of talking at length. In response, Hiraga….

「No, no. It's not me who wants something. There's someone else who wants to speak to you. I'll switch with him now.」

With that, someone came on the call. The next voice he heard was….

「It's me, Alice.」

In an instant, Arisuin's face stiffened. He couldn't see who was on the other end, but he understood clearly. There was no way he could mistake what he was hearing. This leaden, severe voice was—

"It's been a while, hasn't it Wallenstein-sensei?"

「Ahh, you've gone to Japan, I see.」

The One-Armed Swordsman, Sir Wallenstein. One of Rebellion's leadership, the Twelve Apostles. The man who had discovered Arisuin's strength and trained him into Rebellion's top assassin.

"Sensei, you're also in Japan, aren't you?"

「Rather than entrust the supervision to others, I needed to come here myself.」

Wallenstein had already come to Japan. At that reality, Arisuin's body stiffened a little. It was probably from fear, because Arisuin knew that man's strength. According to the League's standard, he could certainly be called an A-Rank. He had no vulnerabilities in ability or combat expertise, and his swordsmanship was excellent. Without a doubt, he was Rebellion's most powerful leader.

Now that such a person had come to take direct command, Rebellion's scheme over this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival must be real.

"Then Sensei, what do you wish of me today?"

After the moderate greeting, Arisuin asked for his business over the phone. And Wallenstein brushed the question away with a stern voice.

「…Alice. You are the most superior among the pupils I've taken. The one who gained results against criminal gangs and cults and terrorist groups… assassinating the people who share the underworld with us in wars for territory no matter how important they were, no matter how much effort was needed to reach them. You may not have ever thought about it even now, but do you properly understand your role today?」

In response, Arisuin—became silent in an instant. And he closed his eyes, as if resolving himself to some farewell.

"Yes. I understand it thoroughly. And I will not falter. I have already earned the trust of Hagun's main team. I will crush them in one blow. And my Shadow Bind is a Noble Art that can steal all their fighting capacity in an instant. There is nothing to be concerned about, Sensei. On the eve of the festival, I will undoubtedly present success. On my name as the Black Assassin."

He made this promise with no hesitation in his voice. Hearing that answer….

「…I am relieved hearing those words.」

Wallenstein awarded encouragement to Arisuin with a voice sounding like he was smiling somewhere.

「I am counting on you, Alice.」

At that encouragement, Alice replied with a nod.

"Yes, please leave it to me."

At the conclusion of that exchange, Wallenstein ended the connection.

For Sensei to contact me.

It was something rare. But perhaps it was reasonable. The festival eve that was happening today was an order of the sponsor that employed Rebellion. It was the commencement ceremony for Akatsuki Academy, the power that would destroy the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. No failure, no matter how small, would be permitted or forgiven. If there were any failures, Rebellion and its sponsor's hopes would turn to nothing.

Now, I have to tidy this place up.

For the festival eve to go as planned, Kagami and her documents would have to be concealed until tonight. So Arisuin directed his shadow magic, and submerged Kagami and the documents within the darkness.

"Don't think ill of me. In order to implement the plan, we can't have uncertain elements."

And all of the traces were erased.

Part 4

After hiding Kagami and her documents out of the way, Arisuin returned to the lodging for training participants.

And facing his room straightforwardly, he opened the door—

"Welcome back, Alice."

In his room which was only illuminated by the lamp on his bedstand, Shizuku, sprawled on the bedsheets in a negligee and reading a paperback book, called out to him.

"Oh my, are you still up, Shizuku?"

"I'll go to sleep soon."

Saying so, Shizuku turned the page lightly with one finger. Certainly, there weren't many pages left.

"What are you reading, I wonder?"

"*One Hundred and Eight Ways to Bully the New Wife.* A must-read for mother-in-laws."

Scary!

"…At any rate, you've been out having fun quite a lot recently, Alice."

In the ensuing pause, Arisuin thought about how he should reply. After overhearing hearing Ikki's concerned phone call, Arisuin had gone out at night to watch over Kagami many times recently. If he went for a walk every night, it was only natural for others to become suspicious, he thought. On a night as rainy as this one, especially.

But giving an awkward lie would only leave him revealed as well. Shizuku was a clever young lady who could discern the subtleties of a person's mind. So….

"I haven't really been having fun, you know? The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is coming up soon. I have to make my own preparations."

Arisuin didn't tell the truth, but his answer was no lie either.

"Is that so?"

In response, Shizuku gave an answer that didn't sound very interested, and continued her reading. At that time, he was thankful for how unconcerned Shizuku was toward others. Her interests and concerns were entirely on her brother, Ikki Kurogane, after all.

I'm… a little envious, huh?

As he thought so, he realized that his days with Shizuku had come to an end. Once the festival eve was over, he would be leaving Hagun. And he would never come back.

—So.

"Hey, Shizuku."

Arisuin, who had entered the room, fetched a stained bottle of alcohol from the travel bag he had put in a corner.

"Would you like to share a cup with me?"

On the last night, he invited Shizuku to drink with him. Shizuku heard Arisuin's invitation, and raised her body slowly. And in the darkness, she focused on the bottle of alcohol he was holding—

"Is that the alcohol that smells like medicine we didn't finish from the bar we went to before?"

When she said so, Arisuin remembered.

Now that she mentions it, this is from the celebration after that first win

in the selection battles, isn't it?

Rather than drink it, Arisuin had only tasted some sitting at her side. But no more than that, before Shizuku chugged water while teary-eyed from the smell of the whiskey chemicals.

"Sorry, I forgot. I guess I'll drink alone—"

"No, it's fine."

Saying so, Shizuku got up from the bed and sat down at the sofa.

"Are you sure? It's difficult for you, isn't it?"

"I'm fine with it today, because today's special."

Today's special?

Did something good happen? Alice wondered so, but if the person herself didn't mind, it should probably be fine to drink. Arisuin brought out two glasses, and faced the sofa himself. He sat down facing Shizuku, poured the amber fluid into the two glasses, and held one glass out.

Shizuku accepted the glass, and brought her nose close to it.

"Ugh."

She grimaced with all her might. The singular aroma piercing her nose was impossible to get used to in a single day, after all.

"You're different too, Alice. You have lots of other easier-to-drink alcohol."

"Ha ha, that's true."

Her words were quite right, Arisuin thought.

"But if we're talking about this alcohol, it's bad for it to be easy to drink, you know."

"What do you mean?"

Shizuku tilted her head slightly. In response, Arisuin shifted his focus to the bottle with the sooty label on the desk, and spoke.

"…Long ago, when I was younger, I made a promise with a neighborhood friend. Adults drink something this unpleasant, so whoever's able to drink it is an adult."

Hearing that, Shizuku let out something that sounded like a small sneeze.

"Hahaha. What was that? Such a cute idea."

"Yes, very much so. …Well, because of that, those kids who drank became adults."

"So it was a rite of passage for your group of friends?"

"Looking back, that was basically correct."

"You were a no good child, weren't you Alice? You hadn't had your coming of age yet, right?"

"Where I grew up, we didn't have that kind of custom anyway."

With his reply, Arisuin swallowed the contents filling up his own glass. The alcohol gave the inside of his mouth a tingling sensation, and put the scent of medicine in his nose. It was a peculiarly strong liquor. In truth, the drink was a very specific preference even

among people who were picky about whiskeys.

"…Honestly speaking, I'm still not very good with this alcohol's flavor even now."

"But you still drink it?"

"It's a flavor that brings back memories, you know? Well, it's not like I drink often from this bottle."

"Hmm… but I don't have anything like that, so I just don't like the alcohol much."

While saying so, Shizuku raised her glass with a jerk and downed all the whiskey in it with one gulp. And she made a sour face.

"…It's not for me after all. My throat burns, and the medicine smell in my mouth makes my head hurt."

"You didn't have to drink it, though…."

"It's fine. Today's special."

While rubbing her throat with a finger, Shizuku answered so.

Special—he had heard that word a while ago too. What was so special? Arisuin asked in unease.

"You said so before, but what is this special day? Did something nice happen?"

In reply, Shizuku shook her head gently.

"Not for me. Alice, it's a special day for you, isn't it?"

…Eh?

At that moment, Shizuku's words made Arisuin's heart jump. Certainly, as far as he was concerned, this was the last night he would have with Shizuku. Once dawn breaks, and once the sun sets again, he would reintroduce himself as a member of Akatsuki Academy. But surely she wouldn't know anything about that. Even

so—

"…Why do you… think so?"

Shizuku answered Arisuin who had a look of astonishment on his face.

"Because Alice, this was the first time you invited me to something."

The first time…?

"How can that be? After Ikki fought with the Hunter, didn't we go out to drink together?

"That was… because Onii-sama was hurt and I was worried. Including me, you've never approached another person for your own sake. You speak to anyone in a friendly way, in a kind way, and you're easy to get along with, but—no one has gotten close to you yourself."

Arisuin's breath had been taken away without him realizing it. Exactly as Shizuku said, Arisuin became conscious of it. Being favorable to anyone, being amicable with anyone, but never once opening his heart to anyone at all.

He had not allowed anyone near unnecessarily, because he had infiltrated Hagun with an underhanded motive. And because he had no intention of letting anyone suspect him, he had behaved accordingly.

But Shizuku had realized it. Arisuin was honestly surprised at this.

"…I'm shocked. You really see through me, Shizuku."

Shizuku seemed to have hit the target….

"Naturally, because you're my big sister, Alice."

Wearing a tiny smile on that adorable face like a bisque doll, she gave that answer.

"You called out to me yourself for the first time. I don't know how

or why, but it must be a special day for you, right? So I'll share a cup of alcohol with you—but really, only one though."

This time she wanted to lay out the alcohol to drink. Shizuku replied so, pouted her lips as if sulking. At that cute expression, Arisuin's cheeks loosened in a smile.

"Ha ha, one cup is enough. …Thank you, Shizuku."

Part 5

It was the nature of fatigue to accumulate. After Shizuku swallowed a cup in the beginning, it wasn't long before she started nodding off on the sofa. Soon, she drifted to sleep completely due to the hour.

Now that you mention it, when we went to the bar that time, she ended up falling asleep.

Maybe she had the kind of constitution that makes her sleep whenever she takes alcohol. While thinking like this, Arisuin picked Shizuku up like a princess. Though she probably wouldn't catch a cold sleeping on the sofa since it was summer, it was still ill-mannered to sleep on a sofa. That was why Arisuin decided to bring Shizuku to her bed.

"…Nnnuuu… Onii-sama…."

Along the way, Shizuku stirred in his arms, and a childish voice came out.

"Haha, what kind of dream are you having?"

"Get out of the way… I can't kill her… munya munya…."

"Wh-What kind of dream are you having…?"

With his face paling a little bit, Arisuin brought Shizuku to her bed, and placed her on it without waking her. He pulled the covers over her. When he did so, Shizuku broke out with a comfortable expression, and curled up in the futon.

"What a cute sleeping face."

While looking at Shizuku's adorable face, Arisuin sat down on his own adjacent bed, and he thought back on the words Shizuku had

said before.

"Big sister… was it?"

Murmuring, Arisuin stared toward the sofa they had been sitting at a while ago. What he was staring at was… the sooty-labeled green bottle of alcohol that was left on the table. And… within the dim pale alcohol, the remembrances it brought back.

Associated with the bottle, the old memories of before he was found by Rebellion, and turned into an assassin. In a foreign country, raising up younger street children together with a girl named Yuuri, with children looking up to him as a big sister—the memories of those final days.

※ ※ ※

He would not forget. In the early morning of that day, rain was falling on the neighborhood. It had not become snow yet, but it was rain chilly enough to freeze the body.

In the cold rain, Alice was carrying a plastic umbrella, facing a tall man. The man was a bill collector from the local gang. The profit from the work brought around by the gang was brought to this man, and the part remaining after they took their cut was given to Alice.

But this was just an underling of the gangs. He was not a decent man who keeps his word.

『…Look.』

The share of the money that Alice handed over that should've remained with him was far and away too small.

『You promised twenty percent—』

Alice complained, and the man spat in his face.

『Don't make fun of me, you shitty brat. Just be grateful we let you

do business on our island.』

Speaking with eyes that seemed to be looking at garbage, the man left.

After Alice couldn't see that back any longer, he stuck his tongue out a little.

Even though we're so alike on the outside.

Wiping the man's spit off his cheek with his sleeve, Alice took shelter and brushed off the snow that had fallen on him.

There, a pink-colored plastic container had been wrapped up and concealed.

『I wonder if it's become a little cold.』

Its content was a meat pie obligingly carried by a tourist.

If that man had seen such a thing, there was no doubt he would've taken it, so Alice had hidden it beforehand.

『It's been a while since we had meat. Everyone will be happy.』

I have to share it with the sister too. Ah, but there's a congregation today, so she went to the neighboring town, didn't she?

While pondering this, Alice hurried on his way back with quick steps.

He wanted to see everyone's happy faces as soon as he could.

But—

『…Eh?』

When Alice got back, the door of the shed behind the church was smashed, partially destroyed.

Seeing that, Alice who was used to seeing fights understood

immediately. Some hostile people had attacked.

『…E-Everyone!』

Raising a cry, Alice dropped everything he was carrying and rushed into the shed.

But there was no one inside. It was still early in the morning. It wasn't time for the little sisters to get up yet. But they couldn't be found, and only the dirty blankets they used were left.

What happened!? Where did everyone go…?

And at the moment he picked up one of the blankets, Alice saw what was under it, and his breath caught in his throat.

There was a bloodstain. Furthermore, it wasn't dried, but fresh blood. And when he looked at the bloodstain closely, he found little drops of it scattered leading out into the main street. After being washed away by the rain, they wouldn't have been noticeable if he wasn't paying attention, but he was sure.

Alice, with his feet snarled by urgency, rushed out, and followed the trail of blood.

An unpleasant premonition. It was an extremely unpleasant premonition. Cold sweat was running down his back. The fact that there was a bloodstain meant that someone had been wounded.

Could it be, was it from his friends?

『That… can't be…!』

He had no basis, but he muttered this as if trying to persuade himself.

However, the truth was merciless.

The blood that Alice was following from the church to the road out front—it went in the opposite direction of where Alice had returned from after work. And he saw—

—*Ah.*

A red-haired girl with a torso dyed in fresh blood, leaning lifelessly against the brick wall beside the road.

『Y-Yuuriiiii!』

Screaming her name, Alice immediately ran to her side.

Yuuri, who was sitting at the roadside, certainly responded to his voice.

『…Ah….』

She slowly opened her eyes, and looked at Alice who was running up.

『…Ah… thank goodness… Alice. You're… safe….』

『Are you okay!? What happened here!?』

At the question, Yuuri's face twisted in both pain and frustration.

『…I don't… know. Sergei's people… suddenly attacked us… said they were cleaning up garbage…. Dammit, they took everyone…. How useless, huh…?』

『The gang did it!? Why…!? Even though we paid their tribute…!』

『Dunno… **cough** **cough**…!』

Choking violently, Yuuri spat out blood on the frozen ground.

『Yuuri! Don't talk right now!』

It would be bad for her to speak anymore. If he didn't get her to a doctor immediately….

Luckily, there were pedestrians on the road, and all of them noticed the situation.

『Excuse me! Will someone please call a doctor!?』

So Alice begged that with a raised voice. However—

At that instant, everyone who was watching the situation from all around them averted their eyes from Alice and Yuuri in a hurry. And all of them departed at a quick pace. As if no one had heard Alice's voice.

Eh…wh-what is this…?

『P-Please! Will anyone lend me a phone!? If it's money, I'll pay!』

Despite Alice's repeated requests, no one took notice.

The people who had been watching the bloody girl with interest from a distance all left in a hurry when Alice called out. Every single one of them, as if escaping from a troublesome matter. At that utterly bleak response, Alice doubted his own eyes.

Why…? Even though she's bleeding like this… no one will….

『Hey! You can hear me, right!? My friend is dying!』

『Forget it….』

To Alice who was screaming with a heartbroken voice, Yuuri spoke with strain.

『No one will… help. There's nobody here who will save people like us…. You know that, right?』

Yuuri's words. Alice understood them well. Because Alice and the others were abandoned people with no relatives or money. There was not a single benefit in helping them. That was something adults understood very clearly.

『But we're… different, aren't we?』

『Eh…?』

『We're… not like them…. We're cool adults…! R-Right!?』

Alice was taken aback at those words, and his eyes widened. Cool

adults—those words were the vow between them, and he admonished himself.

On that day Alice and Yuuri first joined hands, they swore over that alcohol. They wouldn't think of only themselves, and would no longer be people of low birth. They had become cool adults who helped others, who loved others.

But—

『…You're right. You're exactly right! But why are you saying it now?』

But to his questioning voice, Yuuri didn't answer. She just looked at Alice peacefully, and,

『In that case, go and help… them….』

How could she… say those words as if she was entrusting everything to him?

At her words, Alice felt an anxiety he couldn't express, and grabbed Yuuri's shoulder.

『What stupid things are you saying!? Hold it together! I can't do some thing like that by myself, you know!? I was the one who lost to you!』

『…Ha ha, **cough**… no way. We've been together for a long time…. so I know… that you've always… gone easy… to avoid killing me…. With your power… you can protect them… so….』

『Stop it! I don't want to hear you make excuses like that!』

He shouted at her with tears spilling down his face.

But the eyes Yuuri looked at him with were already empty, and she said….

『…It's up to you… Alice….』

And at last, Yuuri closed her eyes, as if sleeping. At that moment,

all strength vanished from her body.

『…Yuuri?』

Raising his voice, Alice shook her shoulder.

『Hey, answer me….』

But she didn't stir. She didn't wake.

『…Yuuri, you can't. You can't sit here like this. We said we'd go south. We promised… didn't we just promise….』

Drip drop. He continued to speak as the tears fell. But Yuuri didn't answer.

How could she? Alice understood, after all.

…That Yuuri wouldn't wake up again.

It wasn't like this was the first time, or even that rare an occurrence. It happened all the time in this city.

But he didn't want to acknowledge it. The place he wanted to protect, it was so easily, so abruptly broken.

He didn't want to accept it. This—bitter reality.

However, time continued on without stopping, and it wouldn't wait for Alice.

『Oh, here he is! Hey bro! That guy Alice came back!』

『Great, catch him. But don't scratch up his face. He's worth the price of twenty of those kids by himself.』

He could hear rude voices and many footsteps behind him. Turning his gaze, he saw the hometown gang members that he and Yuuri had associated with, all carrying guns and Devices. And they surrounded Alice in the blink of an eye, each of them pointing a

weapon at him.

Alice stared at all the adults surrounding him with impassive, hollow eyes… and asked—

『…Why did you do this? We've always given you the money you wanted.』

『Heh heh. Well, it's because of the public officials. The big shots want this city to look pretty, you know? And the money you bring in just totals up too small. If we can get a big bonus for it, we can't refuse to betray you, understand?』

『Well, the strong eat the weak. That's just how the adult world is. Give up and don't resist, alright? We don't want to smash you into garbage like that idiot over there.』

Saying so, one of the gang members stretched out a hand. He grabbed Alice's hair, and tried to drag Alice up.

Staring at the arm pulling at him, Alice thought,

The strong eat the weak—yes, that's true.

After all, these were people who had lived longer than him and the other kids. What the man said was correct. Because if not, this tragedy couldn't have happened.

The world hadn't made a mistake. All of this… was neither unreasonable nor irrational. Cool adult—dancing to some fantastic ideal, it was he who was mistaken.

He understood that well, now. Truly so. He comprehended this, even if reluctantly. So—

—I'll take everything from you.

And at the moment the outstretched hand pulled Alice's hair,

『Ah—』

Alice's vision exploded in furious red.

『Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!』

And—everything ended in a flash.

When his vision regained color… Alice was at the gang's hideout. It was a room that apparently had a thick coat of red paint splattered all over its walls. He was standing above the wreckage of those who were no longer shaped like humans, only meat. Amidst the vapor rising from scattered entrails, Alice's entire body was colored by blood.

And as the color returned, he saw before him… in a corner of the room, the sight of his younger brothers and sisters, their teeth clattering noisily.

『H-Hiiii….』

『P-Please don't… kill us….』

『Ahh—aaaaahhh….』

Their eyes reflected Alice clearly. Murky eyes with terror and despair jumbled inside. There was no hint of the respect they always turned toward him. No shadow of their heartwarming smiles.

Seeing the expressions of his little sisters, Alice was convinced. That he had protected them.

And—at the same time, he had lost them as well.

※ ※ ※

When Alice came to himself, he was walking through the city alone in the rain without an umbrella.

He wasn't heading in any particular direction. He was just wandering like an aimless ghost. The freezing rain had soaked him thoroughly from top to bottom, and he was beyond caring. He was soaked in blood even before that, so what difference did it make?

The pedestrians who sometimes passed by him, once they laid startled eyes on Alice's blood-covered body, instantly turned their gazes and hurried away. Because whether he was a bloodstained orphan, or about to die, they had no relation to any of his life.

He couldn't remember his resentment anymore. Not frustration, not sadness, nothing. All of his feelings, they had flowed out along with his exhausted tears.

But… Alice thought that was good.

—He remembered. The last moments of his close friend, the warmth leaving her body as he held her. The terrified expressions of his little sisters as they gazed at his face. The pain of losing the sweet people he loves.

If he had to remember such pain, he would rather not feel anything at all.

At that time.

『I don't believe it, I'm the first to find such a child.』

Suddenly, behind Alice who was wandering like a ghost, a voice sounded.

Alice turned his head sluggishly, and looked behind him with murky eyes. There, a young gentleman wearing a black priest's robe was staring in his direction.

That expression, it had a certain atmosphere. Alice who had lived a long hardened life understood it—this man was not a decent person. He was even worse than the gang members Alice had just killed, but Alice didn't fear any unease. Because that emotion too had flowed out with his tears. So Alice asked without hesitation.

『…Who are you?』

『Just an idiot hitman who got his prey stolen by you.』

The young man answered so, that he was cleaning the garbage that was the local gang at the request of the mayor.

It was certainly ironic. Calling Alice and the others garbage, the ones who came to clean them up was scheduled to be cleaned up themselves.

Really, how stupid.

Lips curling in scorn, Alice asked again. This hitman, why was he here to begin with?

『…And? What complaints do you want to lay on me?』

In response, the young man answered.

『Not at all. Since you straightened out the business for me, I'm here to bring you your pay. Take it.』

From inside the young man's robe, he pulled out something round and rolled it to Alice's feet.

Rolling, rolling.

What fell there was… an old man's head. The head of the mayor of the city. In other words, the head of the man who had ordered Alice and his friends swept up.

Staring at that head without surprise,

『…It's truly a thoughtful gift, isn't it?』

Alice stepped on that head and crushed it under his foot without any hesitation. And,

『Hehehe… ahahaha….』

A rattling laugh emerged from deep inside him.

—Really, what a world.

Yuuri was killed by the gang, the gang that killed Yuuri was supposed to be killed by the mayor, and that mayor was killed by the hitman he himself called.

Alice was convinced. Hell was supposed to be a place one goes when he dies, but how ridiculous. If the place he was in now wasn't hell, where else could hell be?

In this world, protecting something… loving something…—how absurd.

Really, how comical are we?

Suddenly, to Alice who was laughing loudly with a dry voice, the young man spoke.

『The realization you've just come to is right. Love, money, ethics, morals—this world is full of fictions. Various deceits, excuses, lies, they obscure the world's truths. There is only one rule governing this world. The strong take, the weak are taken from. The outstanding ones follow their own egos. It is the sole providence of this world. And by realizing this, you have become qualified to join with us like-minded ones. We, who bring truth to this world replete with deceptions, are *Rebellion*. Your ability to kill is something that would be useful to us. Come with me, boy.』

It was an invitation from an underworld even darker than this place. In response, Alice asked—

『If I say no?』

『I've already said it. The strong take everything. That is the truth of the world. If you don't accept, I will claim you by force.』

Bloodlust surged from the young man's body.

But Alice stood against it as though it was only a breeze. Alice could no longer be threatened by violence. The man could take things away with violence, but Alice had nothing left to lose. However—

『Ha ha ha, I see. It's good that it's easy to understand, huh…?』

Precisely because he had nothing, Alice was interested in this discussion.

『I don't really mind. Anyhow, I have nowhere to return, no one to protect, nothing. …So if you accept one condition, I'll follow you.』

『What is it?』

『One hundred million–get that for me. If you do, I'll work for you.』

What Alice demanded was money. And not just a trivial amount, but a colossal amount.

『One hundred million to a brat without a background like you? That's a really exaggerated number.』

Of course, the young man made a grim face. And he returned a question.

『…If I refuse?』

In response, Alice laughed scornfully.

『Do you need me to say it?』

He was saying if the man demurred, he would take it regardless—at his utter arrogance, at his desperate attitude,

『…Hahaha, what an interesting brat. Very well. One hundred million, I will arrange it for you.』

The young man seemed exceedingly amicable. He consented readily to Alice's ludicrous demand, and asked again.

『Well then, boy. What is your name?』

『Alice. That was what everyone called me.』

『I am a member of the Twelve Apostles, the One-Armed Swordsmaster, Wallenstein. I welcome you, Alice.』

Wallenstein extended an arm from his robe, and sought a handshake from Alice. Alice also responded to that—and forged an agreement in this place.

Immediately after, he entrusted the full one hundred million he received to the Sister for the expenses to take care of his young brothers and sisters, cut off all his relations with that city, and left.

And as Wallenstein desired, he suppressed all the falsehoods of ethics and morals, focused his resourcefulness on murder, and exhibited full loyalty to Rebellion. As the Black Assassin—

That was the past life of the boy who called himself Nagi Arisuin.

Part 6

It's funny, isn't it?

Reflecting on his past life, Arisuin laughed bitterly. As part of his infiltration duties, becoming an older sister as he was now was only a sham.

But that farce would end today. In a short while, this fictional relationship would go to meet its demise.

At that time, what kind of eyes would Shizuku look at him with? Arisuin remembered the terrified expressions on his little sisters back then, the eyes full of rejection and disgust against a murderer.

She would probably not forgive him. But he wasn't really sad about it. At best, it was a relationship for making his duties easier.

Hagun's key player, the B-Rank knight called Lorelei. To get close to her, becoming like an older sister was the most efficient method.

It was nothing more than that.

Chapter 3: Akatsuki Onstage

Part 1

It was evening on the final day of the combined training camp. In order to greet the students who were about to return, Hagun Academy instructor Yuuri Oreki was sweeping outside the main gate with a bamboo broom.

At that time, a female student in a jersey called out to her.

"Good evening, Oreki-sensei."

The voice coming over her shoulder, though it didn't startle her, had her remembering a third-year girl. It was a student from a selection battle that Oreki had supervised some time ago. Oreki dug up the girl's name from her memories, and returned the greeting.

"Oh my, good evening, Ayatsuji-san. **cough**"

"Thank you again for your help back then."

Ayatsuji gave her gratitude with her head bowed, speaking of that matter with the selection battle against Ikki Kurogane.

"I didn't do anything, you know? It was all Kurogane-kun doing his best."

"But Oreki-sensei, if you hadn't looked the other way while I was

breaking the rules, I probably wouldn't be able to stand here now."

"That's also because Kurogane-kun spoke to me about it before hand. **cough** Since there was the matter about your father, I thought you'd definitely return home for the summer."

"I also intended to be with Father during his rehabilitation, but he kicked me out. 'Don't skip out on training during your growth period. I'll manage on my own.'—he said."

"Ha ha, he's the Last Samurai after all… right?"

"Well, he's been sleeping for two years. After waking up, he's been very energetic. I won't lose to him, so I've been out running just now."

"Yes, it's good dedication. I think your other teacher is working hard right now too, Ayatsuji-san."

Saying that, Oreki looked toward the clear sky to the north. Ayase also said "that's true" in a small voice, and stared at the same sky.

"Kurogane-kun is really amazing, huh? He even defeated the student council president in those circumstances."

"Indeed, right? Even I was a little bit surprised～"

"I heard gossip, but is it true that you were the one in charge of Kurogane-kun's entrance exam?"

"**Cough**… yes, it's true."

"Then Sensei, you had a really good eye, huh?"

Looking only at Ikki Kurogane's attributes, he was an F-Rank. He didn't reach the eligibility cutoff for Hagun Academy. The fact that Ikki was in this school must have been due to Oreki's judgment. Thinking this way, Ayase praised Oreki.

However, Oreki shook her head with a somewhat apologetic expression.

"No, no, that's not it at all. The reality is I also rejected him."

"Is that so?"

Oreki nodded.

—It was rare for a person to lack talent to that degree. When Oreki took in her first impression Ikki, she had no hesitation in deciding she wasn't going to let him pass. So intending to stick to the rules, she had boasted of her own merits as a Blazer.

"But what do you think that boy said to my boast?"

"What… did he say?"

"'I can defeat you.'—just like that."

A child who wasn't even a first-year, to an established C-Rank mage-knight instructor.

"I was so surprised I couldn't believe my ears!"

"…A-Amazing self-confidence, right?"

"**Cough** …And even more than that, he was going to win until he was accepted. Even if it wasn't against me."

"I see. So something like that happened…?"

Hearing the details of his school entrance, Ayase nodded in admiration. Perhaps Ikki understood it himself. He couldn't succeed with the usual examination. For that reason, he had stirred Oreki up with a provocation, and created a chance to show off his own strength.

Ayase thought about it. Lacking power, insufficient attributes, in compensation for his negative factors, he had to detect any means of surviving no matter how inferior he was.

In truth, it was very much like Ikki—no doubt even now, and into the future, he would continue like that.

Thinking of him, Ayase asked Oreki.

"Oreki-sensei, do you think Kurogane-kun can become the Seven Stars Sword King?"

In response, Oreki said—

"That boy is fated to become all kinds of things, so I may see him in a rather favorable light. I think he has enough strength to get that far. …But…."

"But?"

"This year, there's not just the class of people who have the strength to become the Seven Stars Sword King. He might not be able go farther than that, right?"

She gave a somewhat pessimistic answer.

"You mean the A-Rank knight who's Kurogane-kun's older brother?"

At Ayase's words, Oreki cleared up a bit and nodded.

"There's him too, but more than that… there are many kids this year who I don't know well. Nameless first-years whose abilities are ill-understood are representing almost every one of the schools. What kind of power do those kids have? The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival will evolve greatly, I think."

"Uh huh… like with Stella-san, this year is very fruitful."

At Ayase's unconcerned words, Oreki sank a bit into silence.

Fruitful. That was certainly true. In most years, only one or two new representatives would enter. It wasn't unusual for no new people to show up for a year either. Thinking of it that way, a year in which ten people from across the schools entered was undoubtedly a great harvest.

But there was something heavy in Oreki's stomach.

It would be fine if it was one year. But would it end with just the

nameless ones?

…It's as if something has been working covertly all along, right?

If Board Chairman Shiguuji and Saikyou both came back from Osaka, she should get their opinions? As Oreki was thinking that…

"Oh? Oreki-sensei, it seems like a lot of people are coming this way?"

Ayase informed Oreki of this while pointing at the main gate. When she said it, Oreki also looked that way. Indeed, from outside the main gate, the figures of seven people were approaching Hagun Academy in a line.

It was an unusual scene to from the student dormitories to the academy. To say nothing of it being summer break, it was very seldom for this many people to come in a single group this way.

But of the seven people, two were riding an enormous, savage beast that looked like a lion. It was odd.

Wondering who these people were, Oreki narrowed her eyes.

"Eh, isn't that…."

Her narrowed eyes widened in surprise. Among the seven people, there was a face she knew from the past.

"The A-Rank knight from Bukyoku Academy, Ouma Kurogane…!?"

Why was someone from Bukyoku coming to Hagun? That question rose in Oreki's mind, but it quickly fell away from her thoughts, because she noticed something in her field of vision that left no room for trivial concerns in her mind.

It was everyone other than Ouma. Oreki had seen their faces in the data distributed to the staff of this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

It's not just Ouma-kun. Bunkyoku, Donrou, Rentei, and even the others…!

They were various representatives of the seven schools who had all entered the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival this year.

The nameless first-years that Oreki had just been wondering about were all lined up here. In an instant, Oreki felt an unspeakable chill on the nape of her neck.

Why had representatives of all the schools gathered?

Why had they gathered and marched to Hagun?

Why was she remembering an unpleasant premonition?

And more than anything else—why had they manifested their Devices!?

In that moment, the questions swirled through Oreki's mind, and—

"Ayatsuji-san! Run away right now!"

In that moment—it began.

One of the seven people. Even though it was summer, a girl was heavily dressed as if against cold weather. The representative of Donrou, Yui Tatara, suddenly shortened the distance between herself and Ayase with the speed of a gale.

And she swung a chainsaw-shaped Device she was carrying with both hands at the defenseless Ayase.

"Eh?"

A brutal malice that was simply too unexpected. Ayase stood stock still, unable to respond. The roaring blade descended, and—

"Haa!"

Just before the blade sheared through Ayase's neck, Oreki repelled it with a cutlass-shaped Device. Knocked back smoothly, Tatara's body lurched. Oreki didn't miss that opportunity.

First, I have to take control of this…

Why had she suddenly made the assault was something Oreki could ask once she woke up. Deciding this, Oreki spun her wrist, and with the slightest motion turned her blade. She aimed with illusionary form at Tatara's carotid artery. Once that was cut, her consciousness would fade. Slashing with the smallest motion would let her avoid any gaps in her defense. And as Oreki planned, her cutlass sliced toward Tatara's artery—

"*Total Reflect*." [1]

—In that instant, Tatara's mouth drew a crooked arc, and a mysterious impact smashed into Oreki's slash.

Part 2

It was evening, and the sky was dyed in red.

Ikki and the team of Hagun's representative contenders for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival that he was leading, as well as Shizuku and the entire student council who were assisting them, were on a bus slowing coming down from the mountains. They were finally on their way back to Hagun Academy. In the bus, the close companions were sitting together and having sweet snacks, chatting peacefully.

But in the middle of that, only Stella was dropping her shoulders with a disappointed face.

"…Haa～"

"Cheer up, Stella."

Though Ikki who was sitting next to her was worried about her, she didn't recover her liveliness.

"But it's frustrating…."

Suddenly, two female students called to her. Two girls with the same face, her fellow Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representatives, Kikyou and Botan Hagure.

"What's wrong, Stella-chan?"

"Are you carsick, your Highness?"

Ikki gestured to the two of them as if saying not to worry about it.

"She just seems annoyed with her sparring record against Toudou-san."

He explained the reason for Stella's depression.

"Now that you mention it, they fought quite a few matches, huh? By the way, what the results come out as?"

"…Three wins, three losses."

To the question, Stella herself answered with a low voice.

Yes. Stella's goal for the training camp was to have more wins than losses against Raikiri. But one way or another, it had ended in a tie, and that goal wasn't achieved. Stella had become disappointed in herself.

"But I think it's already amazing enough with the student president as your opponent."

"No, Stella-chan is an A-Rank knight. She'd want to win against a lower-ranked opponent, right?"

"…I don't think Touka-san is lower rank than me, though."

Stella spoke those words in response to Kikyou's argument. She didn't think Touka was lower ranked. The opposite, in fact. Stella thought she was inferior to Touka at the present time. For that reason—she was trying to win during this training camp, for the sake of having confidence in the coming Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. But—the outcome wasn't as Stella wanted.

"Oooooh! Frustrating! It's so frustrating I can't calm down! If it's like this, I should just run all the way back instead of taking the bus!"

"That's just nonsense…."

Ikki let out a wry smile. Well, this was how Stella was.

"…At a time like this, I'd better distracting myself with food."

Saying so, Stella took out three Snic●ers[2] bars from her travel bag, and curling up, she started eating them restlessly.

Seeing Stella like this, the Hagure sisters screamed.

"You had three bowls each of udon and ramen during lunch at the service station, and now you're eating again!?"

"You'll get fat, you know—"

In response, as if it was no concern, Stella gave—

"It's fine. I can't gain weight no matter how much I eat."

—that brief explanation.

Indeed, it was mysterious, but although Stella was a preposterous glutton, her body was beautifully toned and had no useless flab. Even for Ikki who considered his own body special, this was a mystery. He could only consider it unfair.

Well, even though Ikki also felt a bit peevish about it—

"Huh!?"

It seemed to be devastating to the two upperclassmen who had learned about it for the first time during the training camp. The two's expressions froze over, and…

"…Botan-chan. The udon bowls were… kitsune, curry, and kakiage[3]. The ramen were shouyu, miso, and tonkotsu[4]. Is it possible to not get fat after eating those at lunch and then adding Snic●kers on top?"

"There's no such black magic. She must have a potbelly under her clothes."

"N-No way do I have something like that. How rude. It seems my constitution just collects all the weight into my chest, so I've never had too much fat ever since I was born."

Stella answered so while eating the super thick candy bars noisily, and when she did—Ikki, who was sitting next to her, definitely heard a sound like something was being ripped in half.

"Don't lie to us!!!"

And the Hagure sisters who had emitted that sound grew enraged faces that looked like demonic masks, swooping down on Stella.

"Whoa!?"

Dragging Stella from her bus seat by the shoulders, the two held her firm.

"Wh-What are you two doing!?"

"Don't give us that! We know you're hiding blubber under there! Confess!"

"I said all the fat goes to my chest, didn't I!?"

"How can something so outrageous be truuuuueee!?"

"We'll definitely have you prove it!"

Turning the shoulders they were holding Stella by, the two began to grope her body. To this, Stella flushed and screamed.

"Hey! Stop! Where do you think you're touching me!? Ikki don't just sit there, help me!"

"Ah, yes, right! Calm down, you two!"

The moment Ikki tried to intervene—Flash! Two pairs of savage,

bloodshot eyes turned toward Ikki—

"This is a girls' crusade, which we won't concede."

"Boys should just sit there and eat Pocky[5]."

"O-Okay. Please forgive me."

"Ikki—!?"

Sorry, they're really scary.

Pinned down by the overwhelming intensity of the two sisters, Ikki averted his eyes from the scene that might lead to an international problem.

And in the empty seat that Stella had been dragged out of, a petite silver-haired girl sat down. It was Ikki's younger sister, Shizuku Kurogane.

Shizuku turned her green eyes toward the three people struggling onstage, and spoke in jest.

"It's a scene that would have Kusakabe-san happy clicking her shutter if she was here, isn't it?"

"Ah, ha ha…. That's certainly true. I'm sure she'll be regretful when she finds out about it later."

Ikki also agreed with her view. Rather, Kagami would also join in.

"Kagami san went to Hokkaido by herself?"

Ikki's question was to Arisuin, who was sitting on the other side of the bus aisle at the window. To his inquiry, Arisuin returned a nod.

"Yes. She went to cover Rokuzon's training camp that started three days ago, and she left early this morning."

It was a lie, of course. In truth, she was tied up and imprisoned in an out-of-sight place within Kyomon's traning camp facility.

But at the moment, Ikki had no way to see through this lie.

"She should've come back with us, though."

He believed the lie without any doubt. And it wasn't just Ikki. Shizuku also believed Arisuin's lie, and it left him breathing a tiny sigh in relief.

"What a hard-working person, Kusakabe-san. I'm a little bit tired myself."

"You've done a lot, Shizuku. Thanks to you being here, we were saved in many ways."

Although iPS capsules were convenient, it was necessary for injecting anesthesia, and the burden on the body was great. With an excellent healer like Shizuku in reserve, the difference in training efficiency was huge. For that reason, Ikki had brought her to the mountains even though she wasn't a representative, and appreciated her work in tending to the minor injuries. Shizuku responded with words and a smile that blossomed like a flower, which she would never show anyone else.

"It's only for you, Onii-sama."

And she held out a box of Pocky.

"Would you like some?"

"I'll take just one."

Ikki didn't like sweet things much, but it was different if his little sister was offering. He extended his hand for the Pocky she was offering, and moved to pull out a stick from the box.

But—the moment before Ikki's finger touched the Pocky, the characteristic red box was moved away.

Eh?

Ikki was perplexed. On the other side, Shizuku pulled out a Pocky with an innocent face, and put it between her pale pink lips, she faced Ikki with it in her mouth between them as if requesting a kiss.

"Nnn～"

"Wh-What are you having me do!?"

Ikki faltered beneath the sudden attack.

But there was no way his sweetheart was going to take this scene silently.

"H-Hey you! Shizuku, what you trying to do to Ikki!?"

"Whoa!"

"Eek!"

As if being held until now had been an illusion, Stella shook the Hagure sisters off easily and came closer.

"It's just sexual harassment. What about it?"

"Don't do it so boldly! So seriously! Don't you think it's immodest!?"

"A person in such a state shouldn't be talking about modesty."

"Eh?"

Having a finger pointed at herself, Stella shifted her attention to her own situation. And she became lost for words. Because the Hagure sisters had groped her, her bra was completely visible, and her skirt had fallen almost completely off.

"E-Eeeeekkk!"

She lost all other thoughts. As her consideration of reality caught up with all of the other matters, Stella crouched down with her face ablaze.

At that figure, Utakata who was watching from the side muttered.

"…She's really acting like someone without experience who just got raped."

"Uta-kuuuun. Once we get back to school, I hope you'll be prepared

for punishment—"

"Hiiii! I stirred up a hornet nest! Kanata, save me!"

"You plunged into that thicket by yourself, so I'm not helping you."

But Stella was also a lady of character. She did not shrink away from something of this degree. She promptly put her outfit back in order, and pressed Shizuku once again.

"Hey Shizuku, the thing between Ikki and me, didn't you accept it already?"

"You mean you two becoming a couple?"

"Yes!"

"Of course I accepted that."

"I-In that case, please stop doing this kind of thing!"

Raising her voice, Stella expressed her dissatisfaction. In response, Shizuku—just laughed.

"Goodness. I'd really like you to think about this more carefully."

"Wh-What are you talking about!?"

"I've certainly accepted that you're the one Onii-sama loves, you know? Yes. But that is all I will concede to you, Stella-san. I will adore Onii-sama as a sister, care for him as a mother, follow him as a friend, and love him as a lover."

"Umm, Shizuku, something out of the blue was mixed in toward the end there…"

Ikki protested, but Shizuku ignored it magnificently. Holding up four fingers in front of Stella, she declared.

"In other words, I love Onii-sama four times as much as you do! Do you understand this incontrovertible truth?"

"How can I understand that—!?"

It was natural for Stella to respond so. What an irrational argument.

"Stop nitpicking with such frivolous statements and get away from Ikki! That's my seat!"

"I decline!"

Stella finally pried Shizuku up with sheer force, but Shizuku refused Stella by wrapping herself around Ikki. In that situation, Ikki who couldn't watch anymore spoke up to Stella.

"W-Well look, Stella. Let's not kick up too much fuss in the vehicle. It's dangerous."

"But…."

"Isn't it fine if we leave it like this? At any rate, we'll reach the academy very soon, so…."

Saying so, Ikki turned his eyes toward the scene outside the bus window. The bus had already reached the end of the mountain road, and the familiar trees and asphalt of the metropolitan area were visible. It was the course that Ikki and Stella ran every day. At this point, they would soon be at Hagun Academy.

"Muu… I guess there's no choice. I'll have you make amends once we get back!"

At any rate, if they arrive at Hagun Academy in the next few minutes, there was no need to go back to arguing right now, so Stella withdrew—and at that moment.

The bus screeched to a halt.

"Eeeeek!"

"Whoooa!"

The motion of the bus suddenly disappeared, and everyone inside was thrown forward. What had happened?

"Wh-What's wrong, Saijou-kun!?"

The first one to act was the student council president, Touka Toudou. She stood up immediately, and rushed to the side of Saijou who was driving.

Saijou was—staring out the windshield with an expressionless, but what was for him unusually pale, face.

"Could it be—we ran over something!?"

"No… that's not it, but…."

Saijou slowly raised a shaking figure and pointed it at the sight outside the windshield. Ikki and the others who rushed up belatedly looked in the direction he was pointing, and—

"Huh…? Isn't that toward the Academy?"

At the end of the shivering finger, in the evening sky that was like the color of blood—there was a column of black smoke rising. It was exactly in the direction of Hagun Academy's campus buildings.

At that sight, all of them were speechless, and their eyes opened in astonishment.

Except for one person—except for Arisuin, who had not left his seat.

Part 3

The bus that Ikki and the others were taking entered Hagun Academy by the main gate, and its tires slid to a stop. At the same time, through the door and through the windows, Ikki and the others flew out.

"This is… terrible…."

Flames were rising from all of the school buildings, and black smoke filled the air. The asphalt paving the road was full of cracks, as if it had been destroyed by bombs. And everywhere in the destroyed campus, the teachers and students who were staying there had fallen. This was no ordinary fire. This was the remnants of a battle.

"Ikki, over there!"

Stella shouted and pointed. When he turned his gaze, he saw—

"Oreki-sensei and… Ayatsuji-san!?"

—two ladies who he knew. Did they both lose consciousness? They were lying on the ground without movement. Ikki and the others quickly raced to their side, and lifted them up.

"Ayatsuji-san! Please wake up!"

But there was no response.

"It's no good, huh? Stella, how about you?"

"No reaction here either. …But it doesn't look like she's injured. Just fainted."

Certainly so. The two bodies did not have any wounds. But on their

clothes, there were traces of blade cuts. This must be—

"From illusionary form…?"

"Laaadddieeesss! Aaannnddd! Geeennntlemeeeeen!"

Abruptly, a very playful voice resounded. The voice came from above. Ikki and the others raised their gazes up in unison, and saw it there. Standing on the roof of a burning school building, it was a tall and lean man dressed in the garb of a clown.

"Everyone of the fighting team at Hagun Academy, you've had a long trip! Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"A clown?"

At the outrageously strange enemy's clothing, all of them made expressions of bafflement. But among them, Ikki and Touka—

"No, he's—"

They remembered the boy's appearance. They saw it in the catalog of this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival participants.

"You. You're Bunkyoku Academy's Reisen Hiraga, aren't you?"

Touka asked this with a grim expression. In reply, the clown happily opened his richly colored red-bordered lips.

"Oh, you recognize me? It's a privilege to be remembered by Raikiri herself, isn't it? Ha ha ha. How do you like this stage? Did it surprise you?"

"This is your doing?"

At her question, the clown shook his head grandiosely.

"No, no. No no no! It wasn't me who did this."

In an instant—the clown Reisen Hiraga leapt off the school building

rooftop that was more than ten meters away. But wasn't Hiraga alone who leaped. Following after him one by one, a train of figures also jumped down—

The entire crew landed in front of Ikki and the others.

A man dressed in traditional Japanese clothes who carried a nodachi[6].

A striking woman who was dressed in what looked like a topless apron.

An eyepatch-wearing girl and a woman in a maid uniform, straddling a lion with crow-black fur.

Plus another three, in total there were seven people including Hiraga, each with strange appearances. Their oddness was matched by auras filled with evil omen, and they stood in a row in front of Ikki's side.

And Hiraga pointed to himself, then answered Touka's question.

"It wasn't *me*. It was *us*, Akatsuki Academy."

This was the official proclamation of Akatsuki Academy, the power that was the eighth school squirming in the shadows. It was their commencement. Against the seven schools that took their name from the Big Dipper—they were proclaiming themselves the dawn[7].

Ikki and the others stood staring at the enemy, dumbfounded. Their surprise was understandable. These were all representatives for schools other than Hagun in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. Furthermore, the relative of Ikki and Shizuku, their older brother Ouma Kurogane was stand there among them.

No, not just their brother.

"Ah, it's you! The one from Kyomon who was at the training camp…!"

"Ahaha, we meet again, Stella-san. And Ikki-kun too. I'm happy to see your faces again so soon."

Among the seven who called themselves Akatsuki Academy, there was also Amane who Ikki and Stella had met a few days ago.

"Ikki, the bad hunch you had… it was about this, huh?"

Previously, Ikki had pointed out his revulsion at Amane hugging him, and Stella coughed as if understanding now.

But—to her side, Ikki thought.

Is it… really just that?

The evil omen he had felt at that time was a hint of this event. It would be good if it ended there. But Ikki had not deeply investigated the suspicion born inside him. If he didn't think about this now, if he didn't look harder—

"Kyomon and Rokuzon, Bungyoku and Bugyoku—besides Hagun, why are all the schools' representative contenders standing here? I'd like you to tell me, big brother."

Among the enemies, he asked the one with whom he had the closest ties.

"What is going on here? I've never heard of Akatsuki, but—"

However—

"Silence."

What came back was not an answer, but cruel words as if shaking off a fly.

"I have already cut ties with the Kurogane. Don't speak so casually to me."

Ouma did not spare a glance to his blood-related brother or sister. His eyes were fixed on only one thing—staring only at Stella, who was standing next to Ikki in this place.

Receiving that gaze, Stella certainly felt it.

This man—isn't half-hearted, huh?

Just by receiving the glance, she was picking up a sensation of her skin tingling and numbing.

The seven people lined up in front of her eyes. Each and every one of them was a devil full of ambition. But above them all, the Sword Emperor of Wind, Ouma Kurogane, was outstanding among them. In terms of intimidation, the feeling radiating from his body was an order of magnitude higher.

There's no mistake. …This one is far and away stronger than the rest of them.

Stella was confident about that, and moreover—she stared back at him with strong emotions. And not just Stella, but all the others were the same. Little by little, but noticeably, the tension between the two sides swelled. In the middle of that, as substitute for Ouma who didn't seem like he was ever going to answer, Hiraga responded.

"Why did we do this? What is Akatsuki Academy? The little brother's question is natural–so let's explain. It's all very simple. No matter how many students get the right to appear in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, a newly organized academy fighting without the League's authorization would definitely not be accepted by the steering committee. But we intend on being recognized. So even in a meaningless festival to decide Japan's strongest, we will show

ourselves clearly in front of everyone."

"I see. In other words, by making a demonstration of destroying Hagun, you intend to take its place as the seventh school in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival?"

"As expected of Raikiri, you understand quickly. That's exactly right."

"…Such lawlessness, do you think it will be permitted?"

"The steering committee isn't stupid. They'll probably suspend the festival."

If one looked at what has happened before, the justice system in this country would not stand silently. Touka and Saijou pointed this out, and Hiraga broke into fearless laughter.

"—Ha ha. That's not true at all. All of us will definitely appear at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. More than that, the steering committee and its parent organization, the League, have no choice but to recognize us. Isn't that right? After having destroyed a historic academy like Hagun, if our challenge is denied, it would be the same as running away like a whipped dog. The League won't tolerate any educational institution for Blazers in countries under its auspices other than those affiliated with itself. Because that is the level of faith the League depends on. In order to recover the faith that they lose, they must prove that the Blazers they've raised is far superior to ours. It's to protect their monopoly over the training system of all Blazers in Japan that they've created in the last half-century during the post-war period."

Indeed. The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival wasn't just a normal school festival. However much the League boasted of its excellent education, superior Blazers were always appearing. It was a stage for Japanese citizens to see these newcomers. At this stage where results were shown, the League was trying to win the approval of the citizens—it was an exceedingly special situation, where the training of Blazers who were the nation's defense, as well as that of other organizations besides Japan, were displayed.

In that case, what would happen if the knights that the League had educated were overwhelmingly defeated, and those of a different organization stood victorious? Naturally, the faith in the League's brand would be shaken down to its foundations.

And that was the aim of the mighty organization which created Akatsuki Academy and employed Rebellion, the great enemy of the League.

"So I greatly apologize, but please fall here. And be our stepping stone."

—In that moment, an extremely strong bloodlust arose from the members of Akatsuki. The thick killing intent was accompanied by the manifestations of Devices, and Akatsuki prepared for battle in unison.

Facing that, Ikki and the other students of Hagun Academy—

"Doing as you please like fools until now, did you think we'd go 'okay, that's fine'?"

Before they knew it, malice had appeared. It was much too sudden. It would be a lie to say that they weren't disturbed.

But—all of them manifested their Devices, and demonstrated their feelings against the enemies arrayed before them.

"If you want a fight, then come get one!"

"Oh, we'll do so without reservation. Ha ha."

In this place, the tension had reached the snapping point, and both sides lunged forward simultaneously.

Part 4

"Nangou-sensei. Thank you very much for going to the trouble of traveling like this."

At the training grounds of Kyomon Academy, in the unenergetic facility after the students of both academies had gone back, the sword instructor who had been summoned in a hurry, Torajirou Nangou was being sent off by car, and the institution's administrator was giving his thanks to the elderly man.

"I didn't think none of the swordsmanship coaches would turn out to be worthy."

"Hohoho. It's fine, it's fine. I was hoping to have a bout with that boy at least once. It was a good opportunity. …And all things considered, that boy was considerable, wasn't he?"

"Is that so?"

At Nangou's reply, the administrator tilted his head in puzzlement.

"I was also watching the bout between you two closely, but there was only an exchange of glares at range, and you didn't cross blades even once, so I thought Ikki-kun had just been held at bay…."

"Ho ho. Well, it can't be helped that a layman would see it that way."

Certainly, at the training camp, Nangou had three total bouts with Ikki, but neither of them had moved from the beginning of their matches, and they only passed the time until the end of the training. So it was unavoidable for the administrator who had watched them to come to that conclusion.

But Nangou was saying that the truth was different.

Three matches. Sixty minutes. From the start, the Worst One had matched every single approach from the smallest behavior, whether that was gaze or sword spirit.

For a swordsman of Nangou's class, the reach of his sword was the same as a field of certain death. If even a single step was taken carelessly, in that instant, Nangou's sword would've taken the enemy's consciousness. Therefore Ikki discarded any thoughtless approaches, making no move to enter his opponent's range, and stood at the starting line, trying all kinds of ways of testing that reach, challenging Nangou's sword barrier.

But his opponent was Torajirou Nangou, the God of War. He who fought at the highest league, and the only Japanese person who conquered China's famous War God League. Ikki could not step into his range, and eventually backed down without ever having moved from the starting line. But—

But even so, Nangou had a high opinion of Ikki. The reason was—

I didn't believe it, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him either.

Indeed. Ikki certainly could not move from the start of the match. But Nangou was in the same position. The Worst One, in the total of sixty minutes they fought, had not given the God of War a single vulnerability to take. No matter how many times Nangou tried to intimidate or feint with sword spirit, Ikki's heart was not even a bit perturbed, and instead Nangou who was trying to attack could not provoke him into leaving an opening.

From next to them, it seemed like a match without movement. But for Nangou, passing this dark and dense sixty minutes was like waiting through many entire lifetimes.

If we both used abilities, there would be a different conclusion, but….

Nangou's wrinkled face moved in apparent happiness.

"If only in swordsmanship, he's better than Ryouma, huh? What an ominous youngster."

"What a great young man. For Nangou-sensei to judge him that

highly."

"Ho ho. Though I don't think I'll lose to him, of course–hmm?"

Nangou suddenly stopped walking.

"Sensei? Is something wrong?"

The administrator walking beside him also stopped, and asked that. Nangou was looking forward at the small shack standing next to the path.

"Over there, what is that?"

"A storehouse. I believe it's where the quicklime for repairing the sports grounds is kept."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, most likely."

At the administrator's answer, Nangou scratched his beard and tilted his head in confusion.

"…If that's the case, it's strange."

"How so?"

"Because there's a person in there."

Nangou's words carried the plain truth. To that, the administrator cried out in astonishment.

"Eh… Eh!? H-How can that be…?"

However, Nangou didn't wait for his reaction. Carrying his walking stick, he strode toward the storehouse, and—with a small effort and a speed faster than the eye, he drew his sword-cane Device, and severed the padlock holding the storehouse's door closed.

That door opened, and—

"Like I thought."

"Mmm! Nnn!"

He discovered a young girl inside, bound hand of foot. The administrator who had entered belatedly also opened his eyes wide in surprise.

And the administrator knew this girl.

"Y-You're from Hagun Academy's newspaper club…!"

Yes, the bound young girl was Kagami Kusakabe.

"NNN—!"

"Don't worry, I'll get you free."

Saying so, Nangou skillfully cut away the bonds tying Kagami down. Kagami, with her limbs now free, pulled away the gag covering her mouth on her own, and took a deep breath.

"Bwah…haa! Haa! Y-You really saved me…!"

"Wh-What happened here?"

A girl was bound and shut in here. At this unusual situation, the administrator showed an uneasy face, and asked for an explanation. In response, Kagami shook her head.

"Haa… I'll tell you later. Please let me make a phone call right now!"

The truth she had grasped. And the reality that had attacked her. She had to deliver these to her friends—to Ikki and the others. With that sense of purpose spurring her own, Kagami took her student datapad from a pocket. But—

There's no connection…!

No matter how many calls she made, neither Ikki nor Stella nor Shizuku, no one was responding. It was a bad premonition.

What came to mind was her friends, fallen at Arisuin's feet. Kagami who had socialized with Arisuin, knew the dreadfulness of his ability. If Arisuin was someone on the enemy side as she feared, the scene in her head was by no means unrealistic.

"Kuh!"

Quicker, if she wasn't a second quicker, if she didn't tell them about Arisuin. Kagami's insides were throbbing with impatience, and—she took an emergency measure. She, with a particular protocol, operated the display of her student datapad. Changing it to an emergency mode for forced transmission of calls to her fellow academy students at maximum speaker volume, Kagami connected to Ikki's terminal, and shrieked—

"SENPAI! ALICE-CHAN IS ANOTHER SCHOOL'S SPY! PLEASE WATCH OUT!!!"

Part 5

At an enormous volume, Kagami's scream echoed throughout Hagun Academy, reaching every possible ear there.

But—alas, it was just a moment too late.

Kagami's scream certainly arrived at the instant both Hagun and Akatsuki broke into a run. At that time, Arisuin had started to move. Standing at the end of Hagun's line, staring at the backs of his friends who were facing Akatsuki—

Manifesting multiples of his Device, *Darkness Hermit*, he arranged them in a fan on his palm.

Arisuin was aiming for that moment. He was here for the sake of that moment.

Arisuin's ability was a conceptual-interference type, manipulating shadow. His Noble Art, *Shadow Bind*, was an extremely strong ability that allowed him to completely seal his target's movements by stabbing his target's shadow with Darkness Hermit.

Once the shadow was stabbed, no matter how strong one's muscles, one could not break this binding. Even someone as strong as Stella would not be able to do it.

Arisuin's ability, under the circumstances of a surprise attack, was strong than any kind of ability. Since that was the case—he just needed to arrange the circumstances for that surprise attack. If he entered the academy, got close to important people with an air of innocence, insinuated himself into their trust, and with only one blow created an opening that he could exploit, then they had no chance of victory.

This was what Akatsuki Academy had arranged, the plan for

dealing with the Hagun Academy opponents on festival eve that they had carried out without a single mistake.

And at this time, Arisuin had carried it out completely. At the defenseless backs of the Hagun camp, Arisuin watched them rush toward their enemy.

None of them suspected Arisuin. That was a fatal mistake. Even though Kagami had screamed out, it was already too late to evade or defend—

"Shadow Bind—"

Without mercy, without compassion, Arisuin threw down countless daggers of *Darkness Hermit*, and slicing through the air, they sank into the shadows that he had aimed for.

—And every shadow of the Akatsuki members was held still.

Part 6

This was something that happened ten minutes ago, just as Ikki and the others were confirming the black smoke rising in the distance.

「Akatsuki Academy—that's the name of the people who've attacked Hagun Academy.」

Inside the bus full of slightly panicked people, Arisuin's cold voice resounded. At the same time, Darkness Hermit was thrust into the shadows of everyone inside the bus.

「Eh!? A-Alice!?」

「What is the meaning of this?」

Everyone showed agitation at having their ability to move stolen away.

Looking at all of them in turn, Arisuin spoke.

「I'll tell you step by step, so won't you settle down and listen?」

And he explained. His true colors as an assassin of Rebellion. The plan to be employed by Rebelliion, and create havoc at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. In order to accomplish that, him and other elites of the underworld were sent in. Furthermore, in ten minutes, the menacing strategy to attack Ikki and the others.

「My role, in other words, is to reduce you all to helplessness from behind after we arrive at Hagun. Once that comes to pass, the chances of this plan failing is no more than one in a million—that was why I came to Hagun Academy, and became close to you people.」

「Then you've been deceiving us all this time!?」

「If you're joking, I'd like to to take it back immediately.」

Stella and Ikki made faces that showed their confusion and distress. But Arisuin shook his head at the two of them.

「Alas, it's no joke. Everything I've said just now is true.」

He declared so. At his unwavering tone, the expressions of Stella and Ikki became all the more grave. But one person—

「I don't understand.」

Shizuku, perhaps the one in this place who had associated with Arisuin the most, with an unbrokenly calm expression like clear sunlight upon the surface of water, interrupted with a question from the side.

「Why are you telling us now? If we hear this, it would spoil the entire strategy, wouldn't it?」

Shizuku's question, it was very natural. Because Arisuin, from his own mouth, had admitted his own role to render Ikki and the others helpless from behind after they reached Hagun. If he was going to do so, the timing of the betrayal was currently premature.

Shizuku put forth her doubt on this issue. In response, Arisuin faced Shizuku and whispered an answer.

His answer was—that he had decided in his heart.

「Yes, that's true. In other words, I want to spoil this strategy.」

An unwavering tone. Words that conveyed nothing more than a certain resolution. The words echoed with what was undoubtedly Arisuin's true feelings.

He was already determined. He would make sure the strategy failed.

「Why? You came to the academy and became close with Shizuku

for this, didn't you?」

「…Yes, that was certainly how it was supposed to be.」

Ikki asked why Arisuin was making this double-cross, and Arisuin gave a troubled smile.

「But I grew fond of Shizuku despite myself, you know?」

While gazing at the silver-haired girl before him, Arisuin reflected.

A strained family. Broken blood relationships. Many absurdities. In the middle of all of that, wounded and lost, accepting anything and everything... even if she couldn't be the closest at her brother's side, this girl would continue to love the one person who was her brother.

In the eyes of Arisuin who couldn't endure the world's absurdities and abandoned love, Shizuku's way was exceedingly noble and dazzling.

And because of that, Arisuin had found himself thinking carefully for some time.

The strong take, the weak are taken from. The words from Wallenstein back then, even if they were the truth of this hellish world—he didn't want to take something from this high-minded girl.

Because if he did, he'd be no different from the gang who took everything away from him back then.

「If you ask me why, that's the entire reason for my actions. I don't want to ruin Shizuku's wish, or the dream of the person who's precious to her. I don't want to ruin anyone. …So for that reason, I want to cooperate with everyone. In order to protect the stage where all of your dreams take place, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.」

「Cooperate?」

「Yes. Everyone in Akatsuki Academy is powerful in the

underworld. If we fight them honestly, they're too strong. Because of that, the best chance to defeat them would be with a surprise attack.」

Treachery from an ally. No matter what kind of fighter, one could not respond to that. It was why a spy had been sent into Hagun, so that Akatsuki would have no chance of being defeated.

—It was the exact scheme that Akatsuki would now fall target to.

So Arisuin had, until this last moment and without showing the slightest sign of dubiousness, acted as a member of Akatsuki would. In order to create the circumstances for the best chance of a one-hundred-percent surprise attack.

「If Hagun completely turns the tables on Akatsuki here, their calculations would be perfectly disrupted. Akatsuki Academy won't be able to appear at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, nor can they flee. ...So please. Cooperate with me, and crush Akatsuki's machinations.」

Concluding his words, Arisuin bowed his head deeply in petition.

It was all for Shizuku and the people she completely loved. Doing one good deed after all this time, he didn't hope to preserve their relationship. He was a murderer, and the fact that he had always been deceiving Shizuku and the others wouldn't change.

Shizuku would probably never call him "big sister" ever again. Just like the little sisters he had before. But that was fine. He didn't mind if Shizuku's everyday life no longer included him if her hopes, and the people important to her, were protected. That was all Arisuin wished for, his true motive that carried no falsehood.

However….

「E-Even if you say that, I can't believe you…! After all, isn't Rebellion a terrorist group full of murderers!?」

「That's right! You admit yourself that you're an assassin, so how can we trust a guy who's still taking our ability to move right now!?」

Alas, people had no way of telling what was in someone else's heart. Especially for the Hagure sisters who knew him the least, it was only natural for them to express that view. The two of them were making expressions of dismay and repugnance at the assassin they were facing, who deviated from the framework of their own common sense. Such a murderer had been living nearby up to now.

Dread. Fright. Revulsion. Such emotions of strong rejection. But such reactions couldn't be helped. If anyone found out that her neighbor was a killer who had personally killed dozens of people, she would probably be terrified. The everyday conversations they had casually shared would all turn nauseatingly repulsive.

Arisuin's assassination targets were underworld criminals like himself, but a murderer was a murderer. The two's reactions were extremely justified. So Arisuin said—

「I think what Hagure-senpai said is quite right. I'm sure you can't trust what a murderer like me tells you, since I've been betraying all of you for all this time. So after this matter ends, I promise I won't appear before you again, and if I somehow come to harm during this plan, I don't mind if you abandon me—but please, I ask that you believe me for one hour.」

Recognizing of course that his own request couldn't be trusted, he still bowed and begged.

Arisuin understood. He could do nothing other than beg. He had no way of making them completely understand his inner heart. So in that case, he could only speak the plain truth, bow his head, and convey his good faith as best he can.

To Arisuin as he bowed this way, Touka asked—

「I have a concern. The organization that hired Rebellion to destroy the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, the one who sponsored you… who are they?」

「—I can't answer you right now.」

「Why is that?」

「…It is not an enemy we can manage. To tell you will only distract you uselessly. So I won't say at the moment.」

「H-Hey! Are you keeping it a secret!?」

「We really can't trust this shady guy after all!」

To the jeering Hagure sisters, Touka gave a command of "wait".

「—If we say we don't believe you, what do you intend to do?」

「If it comes to that, I will have the bus make a U-turn, and make us escape as far as possible.」

To Touka's question, Arisuin replied without hesitation, because this was the last measure he had been thinking for quite a long time about.

「Though since holding on to all of you is impossible to begin with, it's really just my own useless resistance. For me, I can only reliably exploit the advantage of unpreparedness at the start.」

「I see. I understand your view well.」

It was probably the dignity of the student council president. In this chaotic place with the erratic conversation, Touka had quickly settled the comments, and arranged the conclusion.

「…What will it be, Kurogane-kun?」

She passed the entire decision down and sought the opinion of one who would make the judgment.

「To flee or to fight, to believe him or to not believe him, right now it's a race against time. This is not a situation where we can exchange opinions leisurely. You are the team leader for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. I believe you are the most qualified to pass judgment on this matter.」

In response, Ikki sank into silence, and considered what they should do.

At the present moment, he could not have complete faith in Arisuin. However, like Shizuku had pointed out, if he considered Arisuin's standpoint, it was true that Arisuin's actions did not benefit the enemy. Ikki thought it over… and for an instant, he peeked at Shizuku's expression—he answered.

「I think we'll try trusting Alice.」

Part 7

As a result, Airisuin's stratagem had been activated splendidly. Everyone one on Akatsuki Academy's side had his or her shadow trapped in the moment that both sides collided, and were completely defenseless—

"Yaaaaahhh!"

Before the flourished blades of Hagun Academy, all of them fell. In their defenseless condition, they had taken fatal hits. Unable to guard, they could not dodge either. It was victory with no room for doubt.

Thank goodness… now then.

The hopes of Shizuku, of his precious little sister, had been protected. Their Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival had not been tarnished. Arisuin rejoiced about that. And everyone else was the same—

「Wh-Whew…. I didn't know what to do if you really attacked us from behind.」

Everyone leaked a similar breath of relief, and let the tension out from their shoulders. It was probably because each and every one of them had felt the response against his or her own blade.

Except for one person.

Except for Ikki, who was looking with a stiff expression down on his older brother, Ouma Kurogane, who he had cut down himself.

Impossible.

Ikki, at the reality stretched out before his eyes, remembered a chill that made him nauseous.

What is this?

No matter how he looked, this was really his older brother Ouma. In behavior, in aura, in spirit, voice, and face, surely this was the real thing. The response of *Intetsu* also told him that he had defeated the opponent without a doubt.

But because of that, no matter how real it was—it was absolutely impossible.

That his older brother, the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane, was stretched out at his feet so unsightly!

—At that moment, what caused him to realize it was the recollection coming back to his mind. Many days ago, the memory of that shopping district in the mountains—that fragment—

「Wah! Wait, wait! You can't do that!」

On that day, that young boy had, faster than Ikki's trained body, grabbed onto the man who had started attacking people in the street. And the boy had said it was a Blazer ability. Under that state of affairs, taking the boy's physical fitness into account, he must have started to act before the attacker moved. If not—Ikki should've been faster.

That ability could've been one of two types.

One was penetrating sight. If he saw that the man was carrying a blade, it was possible to start moving before the man began his action.

But one factor precluded this possibility. Kagami had said the boy's reason for being selected as a Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival

representative was because he was a Blazer of the causation-intereference system with a rare skill. Penetrating sight was neither a rare skill nor part of the causation-interference system.

In that case, there was only one possibility remaining.

Future prediction—

Realizing that possibility, Ikki felt the revelation. In that instant, a shudder spread through his throat and gut.

"Watch out, Alice! This is a trap!"

He turned in Arisuin's direction, the shudder erupting with his voice.

But—it was slightly too late.

"Eh—?"

Faster than Arisuin could act on Ikki's words, countless swords flew into Arisuin's body from behind.

"Ha…?"

"Ali…ce?"

With a thud, Alice fell to the ground with ten silver swords piercing him. Everyone's breath was taken away by the abrupt situation.

"Not quite, huh? You might've made it if you were just a little bit quicker."

That boundlessly cheerful voice was heard.

"But figuring out my ability just from seeing it once! That's Ikki-kun for you!"

The voice came from behind Arisuin. Standing there smilingly innocently with countless silver blades in both hands, it was Amane Shinomiya.

Part 8

Alice's powerless body fell to the ground. His body had been pierced by weapons in illusionary form, and he had blacked out.

At this situation, Shizuku was the first to act.

"Alice!"

Shouting, she tried to rush over to where he was. But that act—

"Shizuku, don't be careless! Watch out in front of you!"

Ikki's warning was just in time, unlike previously. In front of Shizuku's eyes, in what should be empty air, there were twists in space.

This is—!

Shizuku who recognized it immediately covered her head with both arms. In that instant, something hit Shizuku's petite body, and sent her bouncing back like a ball. As if something invisible had sent her flying.

And that was entirely the case.

"Eh…!"

Was the surprised from someone on Hagun's side? Or was it from everyone? But that was understandable. It was that astonishing a sight. The students of Akatsuki Academy who should've been defeated were walking out from the entirely transparent smoke, completely unharmed.

"H-Huh!? What is the meaning of this!?"

"Copies of the same people…!? Impossible! Then who are the ones we defeated—!?"

Renren and Saijou once again confirmed the forms of the Akatsuki students at their feet.

And they opened their eyes wide. The things lying there were painted wooden puppets.

"Wh-What is this!?"

"*Trick Art*[8]. My art that is even more real than the real thing."

At Renren's cry, one of the people from Akatsuki Academy coughed lazily. It was a topless young lady whose large breasts were hidden under only a painting apron. Like Arisuin, she was hired by Rebellion, the Bloody Da Vinci, Sara Bloodlily.

"In other words, what you've all thought were us were in fact wooden dolls animated by my *Black Widow*[9], with appearances given by her own Noble Art. And the real us were hiding over here with Ouma-kun's wind bending the light around us, waiting for all of you to finish spinning your wheels."

"You saw through Alice's plan since the beginning!?"

"Yes, well. We have an excellent prophet over here, you know? … Though we didn't believe there would be a traitor among us."

While the clown laughed loudly as if he had laid open a joke—

"But in the end, Amane-san's prediction came true, huh? I'm sure Wallenstein-sensei who mercifully gave him a chance all the way to the end will be sad.

He lifted Arisuin's fallen body.

"Well, I'll leave you to finish the rest of this, everyone. Our sponsor's order was to destroy them so profoundly that there's no room for arguing our superiority. To crush them thoroughly, leaving no one left. As for me, I have to bring this traitor to Sensei, so…."

And he leaped backward with a panther's agility, most likely to withdraw from the battlefield. Taking Arisuin, of course.

But naturally, Ikki did not allow that to happen easily.

"Hold it!"

He dashed forward hot on the clown's heels. His speed was great enough. He could catch up immediately—or he should be able to.

Ikki's course was blocked by the Sword Emperor of Wind, Ouma Kurogane.

"Brother…!"

"Fall."

Ouma, without hesitation, swung his more than meter-long nodachi-shaped Device *Ryuuzume*[10]. Cutting the air, he drove a silver arc toward Ikki's torso in a flash.

Ikki was convinced about that merciless strike. If he didn't stop his feet, focus his gaze, and turn to defend his body with all his might, then he would be bisected along with *Intetsu*.

"Kuh!"

But as Ikki was about to abandon the chase—

"Haaaaa!"

Following the same line as Ouma's Device, a flame-covered golden sword thwarted its path.

"Stella!"

He shouted the name of his red-haired sweetheart who had interposed herself to protect him. And while Stella locked swords with Ouma, she told Ikki.

"Ikki! Shizuku went after Alice!"

Being told that, Ikki looked toward where Ouma had sent Shizuku

flying. There was already no one there. Searching his field of vision, he found Shizuku's back racing after the escaping Hiraga at full speed.

"These guys let Shizuku pass! They probably set traps before coming out! It's bad to let her go alone! Hurry up and chase after her!"

At Stella's blurted words, Ikki hesitated a little. Should he leave this situation to Stella and the others?

But luckily, the student council executives were here, starting Touka, and the representatives besides himself, the Hagure sisters, were also here. In that case—he had to join the one who was alone.

"I understand! I'll leave this to you!"

"Yeah. If these guys don't have Alice's power backing them up, we'll take down all of them!"

Stella's high-spirited words settled inside him, and Ikki withdrew from the field to race after Shizuku. Seeing Ikki's back as he left—Stella once again gazed at the boy who was both the one she loved the most and the one worthy of being her rival.

And she knew. Her enemy was in front of her eyes, standing straight like the wooden puppet and gazing at her.

"I've been feeling your gaze all this time. You want to fight me, right!?"

If that puppet had be more real than the real thing, then that gaze was copying the real Ouma's emotions. If that was true—

"I accept your challenge, Sword Emperor of Wind!"

The Crimson Princess had no reason to decline. Because her opponent was an A-Rank knight like herself, this was her role to uphold. Deciding that, Stella pushed Ouma's body away with all her strength.

And against Ouma who had ben blown off thirty meters, she began to prepare her sure-kill Noble Art. It was a technique that

brandished a sword that burned with heat and light, investing all her spirit into her longsword, *Lævateinn*.

—Katharterio Salamanda.

I don't know what kind of ability my opponent has. But I know he's no ordinary person!

In that case, she'd use all of her power at the start. It would be best to decide it here. If she didn't, she'd try to probe her opponent's ability by seeing how re responded. That was Stella's decision. In response, Ouma—

"—Hmph."

At Stella's spirit which was churning up the surrounding atmospheric temperature—

"Is such a trivial thing the best you can do?"

Giving a savage smile that showed a peek of his fangs—he replied with his own strongest Noble Art.

Strangely, he took the same stance as Stella. Taking his huge sword with both hands, he raised the blade, and poured all his magic into that Device. The ability of Ouma Kurogane, the Sword Emperor of Wind, was of the elemental-influence system—the power to manipulate wind.

The windstorm born of that power was turned into a cyclone within *Ryuuzume*, and devoured the surrounding atmosphere. The atmosphere, the debris, the flame—anything and everything in the surroundings. Before long, what he had made was a sword of raging storm-winds, layers and layers of mass stacked together—

"*Kusanagi*." [11]

A sword of light and heat against a sword of storm-winds. Both blades were more than fifty meters long, each an attack beyond the norm. With only thirty meters between the users, their reach was surely more than enough. If they both swung down on their opponent at the same time like this, they would clash.

In an instant, the fire and wind from the two blades of magic intertwining rained sparks, came undone, destroyed the surroundings together as a tempest of flame.

"Eeeeeeekkk!"

At the white-hot tempest that was blowing and burning away everything, the Hagure sisters screamed. No, everyone else in that place including them protected themselves with magic, curled up their bodies, and just narrowly managed to stand firm. If they lost focus even a little, their bodies would've been blown far away, and probably would've taken an impact as if they had fallen off a skyscraper. That was why everyone protected themselves desperately. It was a battle beyond what ordinary knights could bear to watch. But—

Before long, the clash between the sword of fire and the sword of wind began to break down. The one beginning to crumble was—the Crimson Princess.

N-No way!

With creaking sounds, Stella's two hands with which she boasted of physical strength beyond the norm and begun to feel a pressure she had never felt before. Her heels were slowly sinking into the ground, and the asphalt under them were cracking to pieces. At being shown this reality, Stella was astonished.

I'm losing in strength? Me…?

It was her first time experiencing it. The reason was because her plan of using Katharterio Salamandra to see her opponent's response had collapsed in an instant.

It was natural. Up to now, not a single person had ever taken or turned back Katharterio Salamandra, the Noble Art that the Crimson Princess was proud of. She had not learned anything about her opponent with it.

Stella had no experience dealing with this situation. If she had no experience, she could not come up with a response.

What should I do…?

Gradually, gradually. The beautiful cross being made by the swords of fire and wind began to lose its shape. The sword of windstorm was pushing into the wind of fire, shaving through the blade of light with a cyclone spinning like a rock drill.

Finally, Katharterio Salamandra's blade form was cut through. And Kusanagi fell toward Stella's head.

Oh—no—

Stella, in the instant just before the pressure fell on her from above, could not move to avoid it. And at the same level where the two collided, the others were protecting their bodies with all their strength, and couldn't rush in to help. Stella couldn't avoid this strike. Her defeat was certain.

—If not for the only one would could do anything at that moment,

Raikiri Touka Toudou.

"Stella-san!"

At the instant Kusanagi was to bisect Stella's body, Touka quickly used Shippu Jinrai to speed up. Sliding to Stella's side, she pulled Stella away from the descending blade just in the nick of time.

The moment that Kusanagi struck the ground, the blade of storm-wind cut and blew away everything there. While hugging Touka tightly, Stella beheld the destruction with her own eyes. The track that Kusanagi had carved in the ground, nothing remained there. The school buildings, the practice arenas, even the asphalt paving the roads… all had become rubble. Everything had been ripped apart, leaving only a concave track in the brown earth. That was surely like an enormous dragon had gouged the land. If a human had taken it directly, he would probably be leaving no trace.

S-So close…. If Touka-san hadn't saved me just now….

"Thanks, you save me, Touka—!?"

As Stella spoke, her voice stopped.

The reason was—Touka's right hand that was holding Stella. Touka's right hand was propping up Stella's head. Right now, she was driving lightning into Stella's skull.

"Wh… why?"

"Sorry, Stella-san. Right now, you can't fight with Ouma-san. Right now you can't even separate from me, so you can't win against him."

"…ah…."

With a face that seemed to say she wanted to respond, Stella immediately lost consciousness. Naturally so. A breaker inside her head had been directly flipped.

"Kikyou-san! Botan-san!"

"Eh!?"

"Eek!"

Touka, who had stunned Stella, faced the Hagure sisters, and threw Stella's body at them with all her strength.

The Hagure sisters were astonished by the abrupt event, but nonetheless they were brave women who had fought to the bitter end of the selection battles. Though they were astonished, the caught Stella's body successfully.

To those two, Touka yelled without pause.

"Please take her and get away! Get as far away from here as you can! Right now, you representatives of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival absolutely can't lose here!"

At this instant, under this circumstance, Touka was calmer than anyone else.

Beating Akatsuki Academy and finishing this now, Stella's chosen method is certainly a best-case approach, but this situation is already not the kind that will lead to the best-case scenario.

After their surprise attack had failed, the situation changed. Taking into account the difference in the battle ability, repelling Akatsuki Academy was already very difficult. If they threw down a challenge here, and Stella and the Hagure sisters were beaten by Akatsuki Academy beyond recovery, Akatsuki really might replace Hagun Academy as the seventh school in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, making this the worst conclusion.

In that case, what we should do here is protect Hagun Academy's representatives!

Touka, a veteran who had undergone countless instances of real combat, hit upon the single best strategy. And with the strong will Touka had put into her voice—

"Y-Yes!"

Though the Hagure sisters hadn't understood her thinking, Touka's voice roused them both to action. Kikyou, who was strong, put Stella on her back, and the two turned on their heels and fled from Hagun Academy.

In response—

"Do you think you can run?"

At the same time Ouma's voice reverberated down upon them, the students of Akatsuki who were standing behind him in reserve burst forth. The young girl in the dress, straddling an enormous black lion—the "Beast Tamer" Rinna Kazamatsuri. And the "Unturning" Yui Tatara. They gave chase to the three people. But—

"Mach Grid!"

"Crescendo Axe!"

Dashing forward quickly, Runner's High and Destroyer attacked the ones chasing the three who were fleeing from the side, and obstructed their advance.

"—Do you think you can follow?"

Touka asked that to Ouma who was standing in front of her eyes, and raised *Narukami*. Acting in concert, the ones with Touka also brandished their Devices.

"You intend to sacrifice yourself to let the representatives escape? Such a composed decision. But it will only postpone the inevitable a short while."

In agreement with Ouma's words, Akatsuki's wicked hostility rose in unison, and they took one step forward. It would be their second clash. But the clash this time would not be the falsehood that the first one was. It would be probably a genuine fight to the death.

In the atmosphere that was quickly becoming strained, Touka called the name of the girl next to her.

"…Kana-chan."

Kanata Toutokubara. The only Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative among the student council executives. Touka urged her to escape with her gaze, but—

"I won't run away. I'll be with you until the end, Touka-chan."

At that gaze, Kanata did not spare a glance. She only stared at what was straight ahead.

"—Right."

Touka knew her stubbornness well, because they had been together since childhood, so Touka didn't repeat any pointless words.

"What happened here today is an affront to Hagun Academy's student council. We'll return twice the favor!"

Saying just that, the companions left in this place gave forth a cry of encouragement.

"YEAH!"

—Everyone there faced the enemy and threw down their challenge in unison.

Part 9

"Haa… ha…!"

She had been running for quite a while, descending the deserted slope in front of the academy. After Shizuku left the popular shopping district street, her feet stopped due to the pain she was feeling in her side.

I'm… not really in shape, huh?

Clicking her tongue at her own weakness, she inferred the distance to Hiraga who was carrying Arisuin. It was already beyond what she could check with her eyes. It could even be that he had gotten into a car along the way.

But I haven't lost track of him yet.

At the moment Arisuin was kidnapped, Shizuku had wound an invisible thread of water magic to Arisuin's body. That thread pierced through every material substance, and was stretching straight toward Arisuin. In other words, if she tugged, it would definitely point her to where Arisuin was.

But it seemed she could no longer follower them on foot. Therefore, Shizuku—

"Excuse me."

—called out to a man who was waiting for a traffic light on top of a motorcycle.

"I'm a student knight of Hagun Academy. Because of an emergency, I would like you to lend me your bike—"

"Huh!? Don't mess around with me, shorty. Why should I?"

She thrust *Yoishigure* at the throat of the bluntly refusing and frowning motorcycle rider.

"It's an emergency. I'm begging you."

"Okay! Please take it!"

The man smiled and nodded repeatedly as he got off the bike and fled.

Because she was in a hurry, she had no choice but to do this. It would probably be fine if she asked the academy to return the motorcycle afterwards. Thinking that, Shizuku straddled the motorcycle that the man had handed over. But—she realized that she had made a serious mistake.

My feet don't reach the pedal….

"…I can't believe there was a trap like this."

"What game are you playing, Shizuku?"

Suddenly, a voice at the nape of her neck made Shizuku turn her head.

"Onii-sama."

Ikki who had chased Shizuku breathlessly was there. Seeing him, Shizuku explained her own situation.

"The distance to Alice has grown, perhaps because he's on a vehicle. I procured a bike, but as you can see there is a structural defect in it. Even on a bike made in Japan, it doesn't meet the ground properly."

"It's clearly not the manufacturer's fault."

Ikki laughed wryly at Shizuku's grievance. But he immediately hardened his expression, and meeting Shizuku half-way, he spoke. What he said was a question to Shizuku who was chasing after Arisuin, even though Arisuin had deceived them up until today.

"…Shizuku. Even though they know we're chasing after Alice, Ouma and his companions aren't chasing us. It's because there's no need to chase us. It's surely because there is an enemy we'll face who we can't possible beat. Of course, you realize that, right Shizuku?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Alice tricked us. It could be that us chasing after Alice is also a trap for me and you. Surely you know that possibility too, right?"

"Yes, I know that."

"And even if Alice really did cut ties with Akatsuki in order to save us, he said that we should abandon him. That was Alice's wish. He didn't want to see you in danger, Shizuku. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, I know that."

Three times. Shizuku had confirmed the same understanding to each of Ikki's questions. He had come to hold her back. But he had not subdued her. Even though they were the words of her beloved older brother. After all—

"Onii-sama, did you come to ask me this?"

For Shizuku, it seemed that Ikki had come to ask three questions. Those all seemed to be completely trivial, inconsequential things. Shizuku stared straight at the face of her brother who had come to hold her back.

"Alice was the first person I liked after you, Onii-sama. He's my precious friend. Right now, my friend has fallen into danger. For me, there is no greater matter. So no matter what kind of danger is waiting for me, and no matter what Alice did or what he wants—I am going to go save him."

She conveyed her decision to Ikki. She would never take that back. Even though she understood all the risks, she would go and save her friend, her only older sister regardless.

Hearing that, her brother… cracked a small smile.

"—Good answer."

"…Eh?"

It was an answer she hadn't expected from Ikki. And Shizuku let out a befuddled voice without thinking.

"Onii-sama, you didn't… come to stop me?"

"Well, if you gave a half-hearted answer, I was going to drag you back against your will, but… since you're so resolved, I don't have any reason to stop you."

As he answered, Ikki nudged Shizuku's body to the back, straddled the motorcycle, and grabbed the handlebars. And he turned to Shizuku over his shoulder.

"I'll also go along with your wishes, Shizuku."

Knowing all the dangers, he pledged to follow his sister's desires.

"Onii-sama…."

At that thoughtfulness, Shizuku felt a sweet sensation tightening in her chest. She pressed her forehead to Ikki's back, and thought—

My love won't be accepted, but….

It was good that she loved this person.

"Thank you."

As she gave her gratitude, she shivered just a little.

"Don't thank me, Shizuku. I'm your older brother after all. —Well, here we go. I'll leave the directions to you."

"…Yes!"

And Ikki floored the bike pedal.

They drove in a straight line, toward where Arisuin had been taken—to Akatsuki Academy.

References

1. ↑ *Total Reflect*: This uses the kanji 完全反射, *Kanzen Hansha* ("Perfect Reflection").
2. ↑ *Snic●ers*: Snickers, an American brand of chocolate snack bars.
3. ↑ *Kitsune, curry, and kakiage udon*: Widely sold udon dishes. "Kitsune" or "fox" udon is noddles topped with sweetened deep-fried tofu. Curry udon is noodles in a curry-flavored soup. "Kakiage" udon is noddles topped with tempura-fried fritters.
4. ↑ *Shouyu, miso, and tonkotsu ramen*: Widely sold ramen dishes. "Shouyu" ramen is noodles in a soup flavored with soy sauce. Miso ramen is noodles in miso soup. "Tonkotsu" ramen is noodles in a broth made using pork bones.
5. ↑ *Pocky*: A Japanese brand of thin biscuit sticks coated in chocolate or other flavors.
6. ↑ *Nodachi*: A Japanese field sword. Essentially a long katana.
7. ↑ The word "akatsuki" is a Japanese term for dawn or daybreak.
8. ↑ *Trick Art*: This uses the kanji 騙し絵, *Damashii E* ("Deceptive Picture").
9. ↑ *Black Widow*: This uses the kanji 地獄蜘蛛の糸, *Jigoku Kumo no Ito* ("Hell-Spider's Silk").
10. ↑ *Ryuuzume*, 龍爪: "Dragon Claw".
11. ↑ *Kusanagi*: "Grass-Cutter", a sword that is considered one of the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan. This uses the kanji 月輪割り断つ天龍の大爪, *Getsurin Waritatsu Tenryuu no Ootsume* ("Moon-Severing Sky-Dragon's Talon).

Chapter 4: Premature Decisive Battle

破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

KURONO SHINGUJI

新宮寺黒乃

■PROFILE

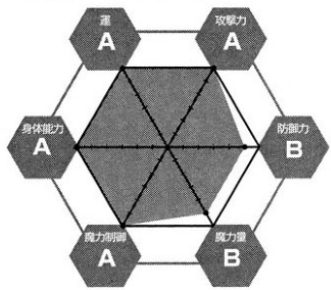
所属：破軍学園

伐刀者ランク：A

伐刀絶技：禁技（きんぎ）・時空崩壊（ワールドクライシス）

二つ名：世界時計（ワールドクロック）

人物概要：破軍学園理事長



かがみんチェック！

最後は破軍学園の理事長先生、《世界時計》新宮寺黒乃先生だよ。雷装は『二丁拳銃』。能力は『時間』を操る因果干渉系能力。《時空崩壊》は、相手を付けた空間の時空を滅茶苦茶に捻って空間ごと崩落させてしまう技。七星剣武祭決勝で《夜叉姫》が放った《覇道天星》を空間ごと破壊して消し飛ばしたのは今でも語りぐさになっている逸話だね。ただこの《時空崩壊》で破壊された空間は『二度と元に戻らない』。そういう世界そのものに消えない傷を付ける技だから、《夜叉姫》の《覇道天星》と同じく『禁技指定』を受けているよ。

元KOK『A級』リーグ選手で、引退時の世界ランキングは3位。でも結婚を機に引退。理由は自分の栄光よりもたくさんの人たちが出来て、命を賭けるような試合いが出来なくなったから。騎士であることよりも母であることを選んだんだね。当時は色々言われたけど、わたしはそれも立派な一つの生き方だと思うな。

Part 1

Black smoke rose from Hagun Academy. Inside those grounds, a fight between the Hagun Academy student council and Akatsuki Academy was unfolding.

The inferiority of the Hagun Academy student council was becoming obvious. Among Akatsuki's students, except for the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane who was a guest, all of them were influential people in the underside of society. They were children who had survived carnage beyond the imagination of those who lived in normal society, and furthermore they were the elite. As individuals, their strength was exceedingly high, and all of them were aces of their schools. At worst, they had the power of the top eight across the entire country. With that absolute difference in strength, they cornered Touka and the others.

"Kuh!"

One of the Hagun Academy student council officers, 'Runner's High' Renren Tomaru, let out a cry of pain amidst her high speed.

Her Noble Art, Mach Grid, was an ability to accelerate endlessly. No matter how often she had been beaten in combat, this acceleration had always been able to leave everyone in the dust. Without a single exception. Despite that, the enemy she was facing now—

"It's useless, you fragile human!"

Was hot on her heels. On the fastest speed of Mach Grid. How was that possible?

It was because her enemy wasn't human. It was a gigantic black lion. And not just an ordinary lion. That beast, in addition to physical power that exceeded a human's even under normal circumstances, was able to keep up with Renren's speed due to

propulsion by magic emission.

"My servant, the magic beast *Sphinx*, is no ordinary magic beast. The stigmata that comes from a technique mixing the spirit of an evil curse with my own blood infuses the utmost power of darkness into a magic beast. There's no human body that can compete with it!"

"My lady says, 'Putting my collar of subordination on a creature can make it into my Device. Since a lion's body is always stronger than a human's, if magic is also used, it would become absurdly strong!'"

The girl wearing a dress and eye-patch and riding on the back of the black lion, Rinna Kazamatsuri was raising an unusually histrionic voice, and moreover the maid riding behind Rinna, Charlotte, was translating her meaning with dramatic words.

"Now, accept your ruin obediently, frail human!"

"My lady says, 'Moving around makes me hurt, so I don't want you to move!'"

"What a bunch of jokesters, huh!?"

Renren cursed at Charlotte's interpretations that robbed the air of tension. There was no way she was going to stop moving just because they told her to do so. Against that black lion whose body was like a small truck, standing still would lead only to defeat. However, with this rivalry in speed, she couldn't do things like hit and run.

In that case—

There!

Renren zeroed in on the pillar of a streetlight in front of her. Her enemy was chasing her back at the same speed. Since that was true —

If it's too fast coming this way, I'll use that speed—and make my counter!

Exactly like how Ikki had used her own speed to beat her before. She'd use her enemy's speed to strike it. Deciding this, Renren raced past the pole, grabbed it with her left hand, and made a sharp turn. Bending the vector of her velocity, against the black lion that was chasing her, she made an assault from the front, aiming at its open forehead.

It was a counter from an abrupt turn. There would be no opportunity to evade. Moreover, the animal, unlike a human, had no posture for defense.

This strike will decide it!

"*Black Bird!*"

It was a punch with the desire for a one-shot kill loaded in it.

However—to that attack with all of her weight—

"Fwahahaha! This fool has never seen the truth of the world!"

The Beast Tamer straddling the black lion returned a loud laugh.

"Have you not heard my majestic voice!? The curse technique binds no ordinary magic beast to me! I'll show you the power of utter darkness imbued in the soul of my magic beast Sphinx!"

In that moment, the eyes of the black lion shined red.

"Bow down! *King's Pressure*—!"[1]

The lion roared. It was a sound that could be heard from a kilometer away, and it struck Renren's entire body. As soon as it did, Renren's body suffered an abnormal phenomenon.

"Wh—a—!?"

My body… can't move…!?

Of all things, Renren's body, with one fist stretched forward, had

become completely hardened.

How? –She had no time to ponder it.

"Guh!"

The bulk that was like a small truck hit Renren's body at full speed and sent her flying.

Renren, whose body was already rather light-weight, became like a rubber ball and flew some tens of meters before crashing. By the time she struck the ground, she had already lost consciousness.

"I told you already. My curse technique draws out the power of darkness! And it isn't that of Fenrir, but that of Sphinx—King's Pressure! The power of the king of beasts to send any enemy within its sight trembling in fear!"

"My lady says, 'As my Device, it's only natural that it can use not only magic, but Noble Arts as well. Isn't it cool!' with a self-satisfied look."

"Tomaru-san!"

Confirming that Renren had fallen in the distance from the corner of her eye, Touka chewed her lip. However, Renren wasn't the only one who had lost.

"Saijou-kun. Uta-kun. Even Kanata-chan…!"

It had only been ten minutes since the start of the battle. Touka was already the only one left standing on the field among the Hagun Academy student council officers.

"How about giving up already?"

At the voice of Ouma whose words dripped with disdain, bitterness spread over Touka's face.

Unlike the others, Touka's body had not suffered a single wound. However, she was no match for Ouma.

After Stella and the others escaped, Touka considered the power of the remaining members, and challenged him knowing that she was the only one who could serve as his opponent, but to her surprise Ouma had put away his Device *Ryuuzume* and stood there defenselessly. And more than that—

"I have no interest in turning my blade against a girl weaker than myself. If you wish to fight no matter what—one stroke is enough. Try to make a mark on my body. If you can do so, I'll be your opponent."

And he folded his arms, closed his eyes, and stood upright—with no concern for the kind of knight he was facing.

To say that she felt no ire from such conduct would be a lie. But on the other hand, such arrogance and carelessness was a rare opportunity for Touka.

Ouma, who had done away with Stella easily. His strength was real. And here he was in front of her drawn sword, completely defenseless.

She had no intent of letting this opportunity pass from under her nose. Ouma was insulting his enemy with abundant negligence. Without hesitation, Touka slashed at the defenseless Ouma using Raikiri and all her might. Drawing out her strength, leaving nothing out. Angle. Speed. It was a perfect strike.

Supposing it was a miscalculation, Ouma's arrogance was born of self-confidence and the difference between their power.

Her direct hits with Raikiri had not been able to leave a wound on Ouma's body.

In ten minutes. No matter how many times, the result was the same. She had cut through his clothes a little, but not through the thinnest bit of his skin.

What she felt with her hands every time she slashed was… a mountain. As if she was striking at an enormous mountain with a sword, a response that was too solid.

What is this abnormal defensive power…!?

As far as Blazer fights go, there were phenomena like this. There were cases where the difference in magic capacity was this absolute. Right, like the first match between Ikki and Stella.

But there can't be such a huge difference between Ouma-san's magic capacity and mine…!

Despite that, why—

Thereupon, as if seeing through the discord in her heart, Ouma opened his mouth to speak.

"It is because of the difference in our training. From the start, there was no fight between us. Realize this properly."

"Tch! Not yet!"

Touka was risking it all here. The rest of her allies had all fallen, and perhaps her enemies would gang up on her together. In that case, she was also in danger.

Then, at least one hit.

Before I abandon my attack on Ouma-san, I have to get a hit!

Touka took a step back and got some distance from Ouma, and leveling the point of *Narukami* at him, she held her sword horizontally.

And with her ability, she formed a magnetic field in the air before her. Cladding her flesh with the energy of Shippu Jinrai—

"*Takemikazuchi*—!"[2]

Plunging into a tunnel of electromagnetic force. In that instant. Touka's flesh that had entered the tunnel of lightning accelerated to a devastating speed. Namely, this was a railgun that turned her body into a bullet.

It was an excessively incompletely, excessively defenseless, excessively hazardous technique. A special move without much practical use. However, Raikiri had no power that could match the penetrating force of that accelerated thrust.

Carrying that offensive power, Touka made her last attack—and clashed.

Blood gushed out.

However, the blood flying through the air was not from Ouma. The blood was coming from Touka's right shoulder, from where she had stabbed forward.

Her blade had pierced Ouma, and where Ouma's body had been hit by Takemikazuchi, a small drop of blood escaped the just barely torn skin. He was unmistakably standing there motionlessly, like a mountain.

"…What are… you…."

Due to Takemikazuchi's backlash, her broken right shoulder was hanging uselessly, and Touka asked with a tremoring voice. Her eyes widened in shock. However, even with all of her strength, her body could not make the slightest movement.

Ouma's naked chest that had been struck by Takemikazuchi. She could see that it had been crisscrossed with countless scars.

Cuts, lacerations, punctures, bullet holes, crushing wounds—on Ouma's body had been etched by every possible kind of injury, one on top of the next without the chance to heal.

These days, iPS capsule technology had been developed to the point that almost no scars from wounds remained. Having scars to this degree was extremely odd in this day and age. Realizing this, Touka felt dread toward Ouma from her innermost depths.

"You… what have you been doing after you disappeared when you were little…?"

For five years he had disappeared from the public stage. Just how

many scenes of carnage he had surmounted? Ouma, having been asked this, said—

"I have no interest in talking about myself."

Shaking his head, he refused to speak about the empty space of those five years—

"No, I have never been the type to do things like talk. My parents, brother, sister, fame—I've discarded all of them. All I have is this sword, and the oaths I make to it."

In his hand, *Ryuuzume* manifested.

"Even if it's only this much, a wound is a wound. As promised, I will be your opponent."

In an instant, from within the core of *Ryuuzume*, a windstorm that devoured everything began to blow. Just like the time that it had clashed with Stella's Katharterio Salamandra—

"Kusanagi."

The sword descended like a tornado. The excess current from the backlash of Takemikazuchi covered her entire body. Touka couldn't move a single muscle due to the spasms from that overload, so it was only a matter of course that she didn't dodge—

I'm sorry… everyone….

The wind-clad dragon's claw ripped through Touka's consciousness ruthlessly.

Part 2

After winning easily against the Hagun Academy student council, one of Akatsuki, Amane Shinomiya, took a sigh. The sun had already set, and the sky was darkened to indigo blue.

"Phew. The hour is later than I thought it'd be, huh?"

While the chainsaw she held in her hand was scraping loudly upon the earth, Yui Tatara gave her honest opinion to those words in a gravely voice.

"Hehehe. It's because you people were so sluggish, dumbass. I got it done and over with in a flash, ya know."

"Hahaha. Someone surrounded by allies shouldn't be so quick to brag, 'Unturning'."

"My lady says, 'You just happened to get matched against an enemy you're strong at fighting, so don't get a big head!'"

"Huh? How about you and me see who's the one matched with an enemy we're strong against?"

"Sounds fun."

Kazamatsuri's lips twisted in a feline smile at Tatara's provocation, and she lifted the patch covering her right eye with a finger.

"I'll show you the power of my Twilight Magic Eye! Don't pretend to regret it later! Seal release!"

"…Even though your left eye is equally red."

"My lady, you've forgotten your contact lens."

"…W-Wahaha! I've run out of MP for today. You have good luck!"

"What game are you two playing?"

Amane, who couldn't watch such half-baked things, sighed with a troubled face.

I see. When Hiraga-san isn't here, I have to be the manager for this comedy duo, huh?

"We still have something to finish. We have to chase after Stella-san who got away, and Ikki-kun too. …For the time being, should we split up?"

Amane who recognized his own role proposed this to the others. However, Ouma shook his head at that proposal.

"There is no need for that."

"Eh? What do you mean, Ouma-san?"

"My brother and sister are heading toward certain death. If it was only the One-Armed Swordsman they might make it, but right now *she* is there."

She—with those words, Amane also agreed.

Their alma mater, Akatsuki Academy, an inconspicuous place in a corner of the Tokyo metropolitan area. On this day, a certain person was a guest staying there by happenstance.

"Now that you mention it, that's true. It's today. That person is lodging at Akatsuki Academy."

"Indeed. Therefore those two have not the slightest chance. It would be best for all of us to pursue the Crimson Princess."

Certainly, Amane agreed. Although *she* wasn't the kind of person who'd take part in their plan, she was a sentimental person. Owing them a favor, she would probably recompense them with her sword. And if she took the field, going to Akatsuki Academy right now could be called a fool's errand.

"Still, you sure are indifferent about it. Aren't you worried? He's your brother, right?"

At Amane's inquiry, Ouma spat out his response.

"Don't be ridiculous. He's someone I abandoned ages ago. I'm long past feeling sorry for him."

"Ahaha. Ikki-kun really has no luck with his family, huh?"

"Cease your prattle. Even with your infatuation and sympathy for that boy, Amane, aren't you not showing any worry either?"

"Me, worried? Ahaha, no way."

Amane laughed loudly at Ouma's reply that had missed the mark.

"I'm not anxious about it. Instead, I'm rather delighted. …Ikki-kun, you know, he should suffer more and more. He should hurt more and more. His body should break from agonizing, outrageous crisis. Because when he overcomes that sort of hopelessness, it will make the tale of the Worst One shine."

Right. That was why the hopelessness should deepen intensely. The sight of him exhausting all his willpower and while coughing blood, but still denying his fate—

"I just looooove seeing Ikki-kun like that! That's why I want him in more and more extreme trouble!"

"Hehehe, your usual disgusting attitude is coming about again."

"Hmph. Don't say such cruel things. Isn't it natural for a fan to want to see the one he likes being cool?"

And the moment Amane puffed up his cheeks in indignation. He noticed that his student datapad had received a mail. Checking it, it was from the one who was their manager, the 'Pierrot' Reisen Hiraga. The gist was that he had delivered Arisuin to Wallenstein, their teacher and supervisor, and was now heading back to join up with them. He had sent over this mail, so….

As I thought, I only had to take this role temporarily, huh?

Recognizing that, Amane communicated using the mail that they would all be chasing after Stella, who Touka had sent away.

"Well, shall we go catch the princess?"

Leading the rest of Akatsuki, he began the pursuit of Stella and the Hagure sisters.

Part 3

At around that time, it wasn't only the students of Hagun and Akatsuki who were moving.

"Goddamn it! What bad luck for the airplane to have trouble today!"

The one cursing was a woman dressed in a beautiful kimono, the Hagun Academy special lecturer Nene Saikyou, known as the Yaksha Princess.

"Indeed."

The one agreeing with her was running alongside, the board chairman of Hagun Academy Kurono Shinguuji, known as World Clock.

The two of them had spent the last week in Osaka, where the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival would be held, but they had just received news of the attack on Hagun Academy from the teachers remaining there, and now they were trying to return to Tokyo in a hurry.

However, the fastest mode of transportation between Osaka and Tokyo, by airline, was being suspended due to a problem with the runways.

Having no way to deal with it, the two were running along the Tokaido Shinkansen[3] train track toward Tokyo. Because, if the two used their abilities, they could reach their destination faster by running than by taking a bullet train.

"…Maybe it happened because it was today."

"Don't say that. I don't want to think of such troubling things."

Saikyou made a bitter face at Kurono's words.

At the present time, Kurono and Saikyo did not have adequate information. What they understood was only that representatives from each school had banded together and attacked Hagun. They didn't know the real motive behind that. However, both of them felt it. It was an attack that wasn't communicated in the news broadcasts at all. And then the airplane services were suspended suddenly.

This sudden attack was heavily planned. That was the suspicion they felt.

"Well, at any rate, once we get there everything will become clear. So for that reason—"

As quickly as possible. At those words, they put even more strength into their legs. …At that moment. Faster than a second, a sudden gust struck their bodies and brought them to a half.

—In fact, no wind was blowing on them. The sea was also calm.

However, on the expressions on the two world-class knights, trembles of obvious dismay were spreading. Their legs were shaking, and their brows were sweating unnaturally.

Yes... what stopped their legs wasn't the wind. It was an aberrant sword spirit that could be felt from a long distance away. To the point where the ground in front of them was going blurry in their eyes, as if a drawn sword was pressed to their throats. The two were both superior knights, but they could feel it and it paralyzed them.

—Going toward that was dangerous. At that instinctive warning, the two had stopped running.

"Th-The sword spirit… just now… it can't be…."

"H-Hey hey hey. Are you kidding? Our attackers have someone outrageous mixed among them…!"

The two knew. This unusual sword spirit. Only one person in the world could exert this kind of pressure.

"The sword spirit lasted only a moment. Was it to intimidate? …

Let's hurry, Nene!"

"Y-Yeah!"

With their faces pale, and ignoring the effort of starting up their bodies again, they raced toward Tokyo at the utmost speed.

This sword spirit, if she *has becoming interested in something—probably Kurogane!?*

Kurono guessed what was happening at the place far away, and prayed.

Don't be rash, Kurogane! It's still too soon for you to enter this domain!"

Part 4

The pressure that was like the sky falling came suddenly.

The bike had been advancing in accordance with Shizuku's navigation for some time. Exiting the urban areas with many people, and even exiting the mountain road. In a deserted place, Hagun Academy's main school was located. In that deserted, desolate place, the bike entered, and it was in that moment.

A sudden feeling of oppression. To a heaviness as if one's gut was being crushed, Ikki brought the bike to a sudden stop, its tires sliding.

"O-Oniisama!? Wh-What's wrong!?"

At the sudden stop, Shizuku cried out in surprise. She didn't understand. As a fighter, Shizuku was inexperienced.

But Ikki comprehended it. That right now, he—had stepped foot into the domain of someone wicked. Therefore to Shizuku's question, he had no room to answer. Ikki just suppressed the dread that was freezing his body, and he calmed his breath. With his right hand, he summoned *Intetsu*, and looked up at the sky.

On the rooftop of Akatsuki Academy's main building. At that remarkably high place, there was something shining white.

Was it the moon? No. It was white, but the thing shining weakly had the shape of a person.

It was the shape of a woman who appeared like a Valkyrie from European legends, holding swords in both hands and pointing down.

"An enemy!?"

Following Ikki's gaze, Shizuku also noticed the presence. She immediately jumped from the bike to the ground, and manifested *Yoishigure*. But—the figure in white showed no interest in Shizuku.

Those beautiful eyes were staring entirely at Ikki, and no one else.

Ikki also realized that immediately… and he decided.

"Shizuku. Alice is inside the school, right?"

"Eh… ah, yes. That's right."

"In that case, go ahead on your own. I'll be fine here by myself."

"No, they've declared war on us. There's no need to fuss about one-on-one duels—"

"I'm begging you, Shizuku. Go."

Ikki's tone as he bluntly refusing her didn't allow any argument.

"Onii…-sama?"

At her brother's suddenly grim tone, Shizuku glanced at his expression… and gasped. Because Ikki's expression had become stiffer than she had ever seen before.

"Is it… that strong an enemy…?"

"…Yeah, probably."

"Then that's even more reason for both of us—"

"No."

To Shizuku was trying to persuade him a second time, Ikki shook his head.

"I told you, didn't I? I want to follow your wishes, Shizuku. Because I was resolved, I came along. If we don't accomplish that, there'd be no point in coming this far. If you don't hurry to Alice, you might not make it. So leave this place to me."

Ikki was stubborn to the end. If she combined everything they said up to now, even Shizuku understood. Namely, Ikki was saying this.

—If Shizuku stayed here, Ikki wouldn't be able to protect her.

That woman in white was that strong an enemy.

"…I get it."

Making that guess, Shizuku nodded. And—

"Onii-sama, please handle this."

Entrusting this situation to her brother, she entered Akatsuki Academy alone.

The woman in white didn't obstruct her. Like the rest of this entire time, she had only gazed on Ikki who still remained.

"Shizuku was transparent as far as you're concerned, huh?"

"Yes. Because Lord Wallenstein is also inside. Besides, whether I destroy both of you here, or I destroy you here and follow her afterward, it would make little difference in terms of time."

A voice that echoed gracefully like song shook the night. In reply, Ikki—

"I guess that's so for you."

—with a moaning voice, he muttered those words.

…This is bad. Though since they called themselves a school, it only makes sense for them to have teachers.

The students were already that level. A-Rank would not be out of the question. He was already resigned to that.

—But as I thought, this was unexpected.

Yes. Ikki knew who this white-clad Valkyrie was.

"For those who aspire to swordsmanship, all of them know your nickname. Wearing a dress of holy white, and carrying a pair of wing-like swords. The world's greatest criminal who's too strong to

arrest. And at the same time… possessing the most extreme swordsmanship. Standing at the summit as the world's greatest swordsman. –'Twin-Wings' Edelweiss. Without a doubt, that's you, right?"

"Certainly. There's no mistake that I am called Twin-Wings."

At Ikki's question, the woman responded with a nod of affirmation, and showed Ikki a somewhat puzzled expression.

"But I don't understand. Even though you know my identity, why have you drawn your sword? You are not a swordsman who doesn't know the difference between yourself and the enemy if you should cross blades, I think. But despite that, to remain unafraid to this degree."

"…Even though I wanted to bluff so you didn't see through that."

Having his own fear pointed out, Ikki let out a dry laugh that spoke to his inner thoughts.

Honestly speaking, Ikki also understood.

Ahh, it's just like said. …Just now, I was foolhardy.

He knew that. Because he was an excellent swordsman, he could grasp how great the difference in strength was between them. He couldn't win here. And more than that, it was true, the one before his eyes was genuinely—the world's strongest. It couldn't be compared to something like the summit of the Seven Stars. Likely, this was an enemy Ikki should face after following his path as a swordsman for years, even decades, of constant tireless training…. No doubt, in the battlefield right here, he could not qualify as an opponent in the same dimension as he was now.

This meeting was too premature. It would not even be a contest to begin with. Twin Wings was—saying this deliberately, in order to give him a chance to withdraw. Ikki guessed that, and thought.

How gentle, this person.

She would probably let Ikki get away if he turned around and left

right now. A truly gentle person.

But, I'm sorry too. I can't possibly leave.

He was certainly scared. Just from her gaze, he could feel his entire body shaking, and cold sweat sliding down his back. His teeth were shivering, and his legs were about to give way. It was the first time Ikki felt like this. To have fear fighting him like this.

But, that he had a reason to fight that terror. He had a reason to stay here! Therefore—

"…This is surprising, isn't it?"

Ikki, putting on the strongest face he could, smiled.

"The world's strongest swordsman is questioning the fighting spirit of an enemy who's already drawn his sword?"

He thrust the point of his crow-black sword at the woman in white, with clear enmity.

In response, the woman in white nodded calmly.

"—Certainly. These words are unneeded."

And it became the trigger.

"If I was not a member of this plot, I would have no grudge against you people. However, because you've come to find your enemy to whom I hold a debt, I won't turn a blind eye."

From the towering school building, the woman in white leaped to the ground silently. With a grace like she had used fluttering wings to swoop down. At the moment she landed on the ground, Ikki felt fear as if his own heart was exploding. His entire body, his instinct, his soul. All of them shrieked.

Run away.

Run away.

I'm begging you, run away.

If you don't you will die here—

But he clenched his teeth, and faced that pressure directly. And then—

"I am the demise who comes from the distant summit, the one who splits earth and sky with two blades. My name is Twin-Wings Edelweiss. Childish lad. You will learn how wide this world is."

—the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane, clashed with the world's strongest swordsman, Twin-Wings Edelweiss.

Part 5

While Ikki and Edelweiss's battle started, in another direction—

Arisuin finally woke up after receiving damage from Amane's illusionary form attack.

This place… is….

As he woke up slowly, he analyzed his situation.

In his field of view, there was a high ceiling. A high source of illumination. From the sound of air flow, he was lying in a very vast room. And given the season, the chilly air was from being below ground?

"Have you woken up?"

At the voice, Arisuin tried to jump up, and he realized.

My hands and feet are tied….

And not just by regular rope.

It was by threads of magic as thin as piano wire. The 'Pierrot' Reisen Hiraga's Black Widow, then.

"Fool."

To Arisuin who was writhing like a caterpillar, the shadow of a person came into view and spat out a cough. Arisuin looked up at that shadow, and saw a face that was in the prime of life.

"Wallenstein…."

Instantly, the young man—Wallenstein—buried his boot in Arisuin's stomach.

"Guh!"

"It's Wallenstein-sensei."

With the pain like his guts had been gouged out, Arisuin awakened fully.

And so, he knew with confidence.

I messed up, huh?

His own betrayal was known beforehand, and countermeasures had been made.

But it was unfathomable. He didn't remember ever having done anything so incompetent as to give himself away.

"…How did you know I was going to double-cross you… I wonder?"

"There was someone who could tell. That's all."

"…I see."

Arisuin understood with just those words. Blazers could do things beyond the realm of common sense. If there was a human who could do this, it wouldn't be a mystery at all.

…Not being able to know the details of our members, ended up painful after all.

Well, at this point, there was nothing to do but lament, but….

"Even I didn't believe my ears when that guy gave his prediction. You, the member who was the most loyal, the most obedient… would betray us…."

"…I was held in very high regard, I suppose."

"Of course. The one who selected you was none other than me. I hoped it was a lie. I hoped it was a mistake. I wanted to trust you. Today, until the last instant… I believed in you. But despite that…."

Wallenstein's tone slowly began to tremble, and suddenly, he burst

into rage.

"Why, why, why!? Why did you betray my expectations!"

"Gah! Gugh!"

Over and over, Arisuin was kicked as he lay on the floor of the training arena below Akatsuki Academy.

"You should've known! You should've understood more than enough! That love is useless in this world full of lies! I taught all of this to you! So why did you make the same mistake! Didn't you throw it away!? Didn't you recognize the same truths we did!?"

"Guggh, ugh! K-Kuh!"

Bones breaking, internal organs ripping. Arisuin coughed up black blood. But Wallenstein's violence didn't end. With fiery anger, Wallenstein continued to strike Arisuin.

Because he knew Arisuin's past, Wallenstein could not comprehend it. Why was the prodigy he personally discovered so foolish as to return to denying power?

"What are you trying to do? Answer me…!"

The kicks stopped, and Wallenstein asked that as he breathed heavily. To that question, Arisuin—twisted his bleeding lips in self-derision.

"…Yes. That's it. That's what I wanted."

Arisuin thought. At the time he lost Yuuri and the others, he was going to throw away everything. For that reason, he had demanded money from Wallenstein. In order to sever all relations with them by giving the Sister enough money to support his little sisters until they became adults.

But—when he was handing over that money, he had told the Sister about annihilating that gang and selling himself as a professional killer, and she went to the shed behind the church and brought out the green alcohol bottle. And with tears spilling out, she said this.

「Take this with you. This is something you as you are now will need. And one of these days, please remember. That you and Yuuri swore over alcohol, to be noble—」

He had no intention of holding on to the thing. It was the remnants of his dream with Yuuri, to love and protect others even though they had not grown up loved and protected by anyone. He didn't even want to see it. He was going to throw it all away and go with Wallenstein. In order to hate everything about the world.

"But—in the end, I couldn't cast it aside."

No matter how much he abandoned common sense, no matter how much he degraded himself as a hitman, he couldn't bring himself to let go of this bottle.

And in not letting it go, he came across someone. A girl he wanted to gamble everything on again to protect.

"I met Shizuku, and I finally remembered. What kind of adult I wanted to be. The desire that I myself tried to run away from, to rebel against, to throw away…."

That was why Arisuin decided it. Even if Shizuku knew his real self and never called him her older sister again, he would remember his true desire and protect everything she had! Therefore—

"I'll protect that girl's hopes! I won't let you people do as you like!"

At that moment, Arisuin undid the restraints tying him down, and leaped up. Restraints like this couldn't bind an assassin of Arisuin's level. And he immediately summoned *Darkness Hermit*, aiming for Wallenstein's shadow—

"Such a waste."

In the instant he tried to throw, Wallenstein's kick penetrated Arisuin's solar plexus yet again. It was a counter so fast that it seemed to have foreknowledge of Arisuin's movement. In reality, Wallenstein knew. The Black Assassin wouldn't be restrained

obediently like this. Because he knew, he was able to make the first move.

"G-Gah…!"

Darkness Hermit slipped from Arisuin's hand, and he crumpled down onto the floor again. And looking down on his pupil who was fainting in agony from not being able to breath due to the blow to the diaphragm—

"Now I understand your foolishness thoroughly. …In short, you grew sympathy for that girl?"

—Wallenstein… smiled with a sadistic smile that sent chills down Arisuin's spine.

"In that case, this is the perfect time."

He said this.

"Eh?"

The perfect time. What did that mean? The moment Arisuin was about to ask….

The underground training arena. One part of its ceiling caved in with a crash. At the same time, from the hole, an enormous lump of water fell down to the training arena. And in addition, an undisturbed spherical mass of water descended as well. In the middle of it—

"Sh-Shizuku…!?"

—a petite girl with silver hair.

It was the 'Lorelei', Shizuku Kurogane.

Part 6

"I finally found you, Alice."

From the high ceiling, Shizuku descended clad in the mass of water. The instant he saw her form, Arisuin's expression paled to a degree it hadn't reached until now.

"Wh-Why did you come here!? I told you to abandon me, didn't I?"

"Yes, I heard you."

"If you did, then—"

"But I don't remember accepting that."

"Wha…."

At that object, Arisuin became speechless. Certainly he didn't remember her agreeing, but—

Why…?

"Shizuku, I'm a murderer, right? I've always been deceiving you, haven't I?"

Arisuin's mind flashed back to the scene from that day. The frightened faces of his little brothers and sisters as they saw him covered in blood. He was a murderer no one should look at. He didn't deserve Shizuku's help.

"So why…."

Arisuin asked with an anguished expression. At that question, Shizuku answered simply—

"What about it? You're precious to me, so it doesn't matter."

Straightforwardly, fearlessly, without disdain—without any change from before she knew of Arisuin's true nature, she gazed upon him and answered with affection filling her green eyes.

"Whatever secrets you have, Alice. Whatever guilt you carry from the past. As far as I'm concerned, you're stylish, cool, very calming when you're with me, good at fixing my hair and doing my makeup, always seriously listening to my troubles, cheering me up when I'm worried… fighting alongside me and those important to me. You're my most precious friend. That's all it is. Abandoning my gentle big sister, how could I do that?"

"Shizu…ku…."

"Don't think you treasure me and that's it. I treasure you just the same. –Compared to those guys, do they feel anything like that?"

To Shizuku's unshakable determination, Arisuin had nothing to say. The feelings welling in his chest were too big for him to put into words. He thought she would loathe him. He thought she would eventually look at him with the same eyes his little sisters did.

Despite that—Shizuku hadn't changed, and continued to adore him. This reailty, it brought back strong feelings to Arisuin's heart. He hadn't hoped for it, he thought he couldn't wish for it, not the slightest desire—

Shizuku, I….

"That's enough talk."

But at that moment, Wallenstein struck Arisuin's back with his heel.

"Gah!"

The impact sank through his back into his organs, and Arisuin almost fainted in agony. Coughing violently, he curled his body

together.

Watching his student with cold eyes, Wallenstein—

"You can lie there, and behold a traitor's reward."

—summoned a longsword to his right hand, slowly turned toward Shizuku, and started walking.

Arisuin could already understand what he meant by "the perfect time". Killing intent. He would kill Shizuku. In front of Arisuin's eyes.

"S-Stop…. **cough**"

As if to hold him back, Arisuin's spasming diaphragm didn't let him make the words. So he could only pray.

Get away, Shizuku…!

They weren't teacher and student just for show. Arisuin knew. Wallenstein's strength, such that he was called "master swordsman" despite only having one arm.

The Blazer known as the One-Armed Swordsman who none who could match in offense and defense during battle.

Your water powers won't do anything against this man! Hurry and run!

But his frantic begging didn't reach her. No, it reached her, but she didn't heed it. Because Shizuku had already prepared herself for the worst when coming here. Showing no intention to flee, she threw a remark to the approaching Wallenstein.

"From the looks of it, you're the boss of my eldest brother and the others, right?"

"I am Wallenstein, of Rebellion."

"I'm not interested in your name. Return Alice to me. That's all I care about."

"Do you think I will?"

"No. But I thought I'd ask anyway. Because after all—

Shouldn't I have an excuse for killing you?"

Declaring this, Shizuku waved *Yoishigure* like a conductor's baton from within her sphere of water. In accord with her movement, the mass of water wrapped around her took the form of enormous lashes. From the tips of the many lashes, the gathered water froze.

They took the shape of a thorn-covered hammer, and the hammer of ice swung down upon Wallenstein.

Part 7

The hammer of ice struck violently without mercy, breaking the training arena floor with a cloud of dust and a thunderous roar. However—

"What a fine disposition, little girl."

The icy hammer had fallen slightly to Wallenstein's side. Wallenstein was currently uninjured, and slowly walking toward Shizuku.

If the hammer had hit, a human would've been smashed to pieces. Whatever words Shizuku had used, she must have also been hesitant?

—No. Shizuku wasn't like that. Among Ikki's group, she was unmistakably the most ruthless and merciless. Shizuku was surely serious. Right now, she was definitely swinging the ice hammer to crush Wallenstein.

Despite that, the ice hammer had missed.

What happened?

It wasn't that Wallenstein had moved. However, it was difficult to think that one who had magic control at the highest level among humanity had missed. Some ability must have been used to influence this. Shizuku thought this far, and—

…Well, whatever.

She didn't know what trick he had used, but—

"Toudo Heigen."

It would be best to use excessive bullets and avoid physical contact with her opponent. Shizuku thought this, and first froze the battlefield to deprive him of footing. It would greatly reduce the opponent's agility, and more than that—

"*Keppu San'u*[4]."

Churning the enormous mass of water, she had it form spikes like a hedgehog.

"Fire volley."

The thorns of water fired in all directions without any attempt at aim. In a second, many thousands of high pressure water bullets drilled through the entire battlefield, cutting through concrete.

It was a quantity of water incomparably greater than what she used in the fight against Raikiri some time ago. But it was no wonder. Raikiri used lightning. In order for Shizuku, who used water, to fight against that, she would have to make all of her water pure in order to insulate herself from electricity. Because of that, the quantity of water she could use at the same time was limited.

However, right now there was no similar limit. The amount of water Shizuku could use was several hundred times greater than in the fight with Raikiri. The floor of Akatsuki Academy's underground training arena, the walls, the ceiling—every nook and cranny, had been filled with holes!

It was surely a masterful burst of projectiles that came down like hail. In the closed space of this underground arena, there had been no place to escape. Wallenstein must also have had his body soaked by this barrage—

As Shizuku planned, the bullets from Keppu San'u had struck Wallenstein directly.

But… even though… that was true.

Wallenstein did not stop. To say nothing of being made ground meat by the barrage, it had not even disturbed his calm stride. Indeed, he was walking calmly over the frozen ground.

What is this? Toudo Heigen and Keppu San'u aren't doing anything at all!?

In the middle of the surroundings that were without exception transformed into wreckage, blowing up dust and haze. Wallenstein had not taken any damage. On the contrary, not a spot of water could even be seen on his clothes.

Just what was this? Shizuku was definitely perplexed. And to the perplexed Shizuku, Wallenstein gave a low laugh.

"How regrettable. If I had no grudge against you, I would find this quite favorable. Well, this is also the whim of fate."

Casually, with ten meters of distance between them, he took up a stance with his enormous sword in his left hand resting on his shoulder. The instant she saw this manifestation, Shizuku's whole body shivered. There was no mistake. She could instinctively sense that this stance was for the 'One-Armed Swordsman' Wallenstein's true deadly technique.

Something is coming!

Shizuku immediately ended the rain of projectiles from Keppu San'u, and protected herself with the frozen mass of water. With permafrost that had an excellent protective strength, she formed a castle wall. With what should be called a stronghold, she had prepared a defense with perfect readiness—

"Shizuku—don't guard against that!"

In that moment.

"*Bergschneiden*[5]."

Everything that protected her body was easily cut away.

Part 8

The world's strongest swordsman, Edelweiss. The one confronting her, the 'Worst One' Ikki Kurogane, immediately—

"Ooooohhh!"

—emitted a raging blue aura that coiled around his body, activating the Noble Art Ittou Shura.

Faster than the exchange of a single blade stroke. Why did he use this technique with a strictly limited duration of one minute from the start? It was obvious—if he didn't, he would not be able to fight at all.

It was none other than Ikki's own insight, recognizing that difference between their power.

One minute. It was the limit to how long he could match the strongest in the world.

And that judgment was correct. Edelweiss attacked with the wind coiling around around her. From the beginning, Ikki was confident that he had not erred in his judgment about his opponent. The moment Edelweiss swung both swords, his eyes lost sight of the attack. In confusion, he hurled his body backward.

At that instant, the air where Ikki's nose had been was split. Something invisible and absurdly sharp flitted across his eyes, just barely scraping his nose. At the odor of something burning drifted by, Ikki understood. The invisible thing that had flitted near had been an attack—Edelweiss's two swords.

I can't—see her strikes!

Because it was much too fast, much too sharp, he could not even

see the afterimages of the twin pure-white blades with the naked eye. What had just barely been perceived was a glimmer of incandescence in the air due to the sword blades cutting through it at extraordinary speed.

What a temper…! If I lose focus for an instant, my head will fly…!

At this moment, Ikki abandoned any thought of taking the fight by trickery. Literally, his breath had been sucked away.

To deal with the slash that could of Edelweiss's two swords that drew a flash, he mustered all his nerves. Among the techniques he knew, the invisible technique that boasted of such speed as to be invisible. With the seventh secret sword *Raikou*, which used the power of Ittou Shura that was coiled around his body, he met the approaching attack.

Once, twice, three times, four times—the invisibly entangled steel gave births to white spars in the dark night. Ten clashes in all. Against the invisible chain of attacks that Edelweiss sent out with little pause, Ikki had traced back their movements from her gaze, just barely defending himself.

But from the beginning, Ikki's expression as he endured this showed obvious astonishment.

A-Amazing…!

Receiving the slashes had sent numbness from both hands to his shoulders. It wasn't just speed—but also preposterously heavy force. Despite being sent by only one hand, each was far beyond Ikki's Raikou!

Why? Ikki understood the reason instantly.

"Kuh!"

Ikki fought back with Raikou yet again against Edelweiss's approaching attack. Amidst the crossing steel that gave off sparks, Ikki was sure his understanding was correct.

That's the reason…! This person's actions aren't making any sounds!

Her steps, her slashes, everything she did was completely silent.

Sounds were waves born of impacts against the atmosphere causing oscillations. Put another way, one could call it the dispersion of physical force. So if one was able to control the energy of his actions completely, and not allow any to be consumed uselessly, what would happen? As a result of making all actions silent, one could show speed and offensive at close to a hundred percent potential.

Such a thing was not the technique of a human being, but—without a doubt, this was possible for the human in front of Ikki's eyes. Ikki understood that, and shuddered as he swallowed the saliva gathering in his mouth.

This is… the world's strongest swordsman…!

In offensive approach. In swordsmanship. In all of these things—she was beyond the pale. There was no chance to get an advantage.

—However.

Even if that's true, I can't just defend!

While barely defending against the unpredictable attacks coming endlessly, Ikki understood this.

Raikou is just barely enough! I can't match her in speed or offense! If I just take this directly, I'll be cut through in five seconds!

For that reason, he had to shift to another way to attack. Offense was the best defense. He didn't believe those words as is, but the truth was too one-sided here. Even if an attack wouldn't hit or reach the opponent, if it broke her posture, it would have meaning.

Therefore, Ikki made his decision. Facing the world's strongest swordsman—to attack. He was not going to be stingy. Against this opponent, he couldn't afford to be so.

Clashing with everything I have…!

Instantly, Ikki put his decision to action. The high speed attack sent

from Edelweiss's two swords. Ikki too a step back as if running away from them.

Edelweiss immediately lunged, chasing after him with her swords held like a cross. Raising them as both a defense and a cutting attack was a stance that showed no openings. The opponent he was confronting was pursuing, but at the same time it was also the best state of affairs for him—exactly as Ikki predicted.

Here I go!

Against the pure white Edelweiss, Ikki set forth. And using a unique step, he created an afterimage by suddenly changing his body's speed as he moved forward—

The fourth secret sword, *Shinkirou*.

Edelweiss attacked the afterimage brought forth by the illusory footwork. Her two swords slashed toward it simultaneously from both sides in a cross. But since it was nothing more than an afterimage, the blades cut only air. As a result—

Her chest is open!

Aiming for that, Ikki prepared *Intetsu* and rushed toward it—

But suddenly, Ikki brought his body back from his charge in panic. In that moment, an invisible slash went through the space where Ikki's neck had been.

No good! Her sword travels faster than I can step in! I can't finish her like this!

If he had stood within range carelessly, he would've been decapitated just now.

But is this something I'll give up on after trying once or twice!?

If he wasn't good enough in speed, then Ikki attacked a second time, switching to power. Twisting his upper body against his lower body like a spring, putting all his weight and physical strength and concentrating them into a single charging thrust, it was the Worst

One's strongest technique—

The first secret sword—*Saigeki*.

Ikki's highest offensive ability that even put a hole in that giant rock doll. The charge and its penetrating power was peerless. Even someone like Edelweiss would have no response but to flee—what naïve thinking.

"Wha…!"

The next instant, Saigeki's charge lost power, and was no longer advancing.

Why? —The reason was Edelweiss, who *Intetsu* infused with Saigeki's force was rushing toward, had stopped Saigeki by blocking with her own swords. At the tip of his sword that was no wider than a needle, her blades had met perfectly, countering Ikki's highest offensive ability. —It was indeed amazing.

"Ugh…!"

Just like that, at the deed which displayed the true difference between the two of them, a great agitation grew in Ikki's chest.

And Edelweiss didn't miss that agitation. She took the gap in Ikki's reaction that had become just slightly dull—

"Whoa!"

Edelweiss's attack tore Ikki's skin at last. What was torn was—his forehead. To make things worse, the blood that burst out from there flowed into Ikki's eyes.

My view!

Of course, Edelweiss didn't let that fatal vulnerability pass. What she unleashed was the instant cross-shaped attack that she had showed at the beginning. The pursuing sword, with its swift stroke, burned the air white—

"Haaaaa!"

But all of that was an interaction Ikki Kurogane had foreseen. He drove her off, and all of her cross-like attacks. For Ikki who had the vision of both eyes stolen away, not a bit of agitation was in him.

How? All of that was already things he didn't need to see!

I can't see the swings, but I can see through the muscles moving her body!

Edelweiss's breath. Swordsmanship. Tempo. Footwork—

It was the peerless ability of insight, stripping bare the essence of the opponent's habits through the information he gained from the opponent while fighting.

Perfect Vision—using the asset he had besides sword technique, the Worst One saw through Edelweiss's own technique. So he didn't need vision anymore. Because even without something like vision, he could predict two or three moves ahead of his enemy!

"You're doing quite well."

Even the world's strongest revealed a voice of admiration at Ikki's sensitivity that approached the mystical mind's eye.

However, her slashing attacks did not slow. From the front, she attacked with the absolute advantage afforded by her two-sword style. It was a continuous onslaught. She understood that her own sword-wielding muscles had been seen through, but the difference that existed between them would not be surmounted just by something like foresight.

In that case, there was no need for trickery. It was enough just to press forward with speed and power.

—It was entirely proper judgment. As it was, she immediately pressed the attack. Again, Ikki was confident about this. For that reason—

The fight will be decided here—!

It was only one thing, but there was a way to change the flow of

this situation. While handling the silent shadowless attack with only foresight, he considered it. Edelweiss had not fallen back once during this fight. She had defended while advancing, but she had never moved to evade. Why? It was simple. She didn't need to. There was no need to dodge. The spare time to defend while attacking was more than enough. Ikki's sword was nothing more than a single blade, to be brushed aside by Edelweiss's own. If he considered the difference between them, that was certain. Therefore Edelweiss had not chosen to evade.

Then in that case—

On that point, there was a way for him to survive. Because it was certain, it was the one thing that was easy to read!

This is the single point where I can disrupt her rhythm!

And Ikki's last offense came out. Flicking one pure-white blade with just a bit of strength, he would delay the returning sword. An attack thrust into that gap could bring it all to an end.

The blade of *Intetsu* just barely scraped along the ground—no, while scraping the ground, it drove toward Edelweiss.

The swing was big, like a sharp gale. However, it would probably not reach Edelweiss. If Ikki's sword was like a gale, Edelweiss's sword was like a flash. Without a doubt, she would block.

However—that was nothing to worry about. Because this technique was purposely such that there was meaning for it to be blocked. In the instant that the opponent defended against *Intetsu*, from his feet to his fingers, all of his muscles worked together, flexing to cast forth a shock wave.

The human body was mostly flesh made of and filled with water. Therefore, it was fragile against vibrations. If a slight ripple was made on a human body that was vulnerable to vibrations, the interior of that body would be disrupted. For example, there was a type of penetrating blow in Chinese martial arts that used this principle.

In other words, Ikki's attack was a penetrating blow using an edge. It would bypass armor and strike the internal organs. If blocked with swords, it would strike both arms. Arriving at the human body through vibration of the sword blade, it was a poisonous stroke that brought disruption.

The sixth secret sword—*Dokuga no Tachi*[6]

Taking heed of the difference in their strength, and making sure she wouldn't evade. One could say that Ikki had truly made sure of the difference between his movements and Edelweiss's correctly.

However, the secret sword would only be effective in the situation where the opponent blocked forcefully. And exactly as Ikki planned, Edelweiss did not have any doubts—and blocked the poisonous longsword with her pure white blade!

However much she was the world's strongest, Edelweiss was still human. In the structure of a human body, she was no different from Ikki. In that case, she had no way to escape from this poison!

Ikki aimed at Edelweiss's naked sword, drove into it the shock wave born of his all his muscles working together.

In that instant, blood surged out from all over Ikki's body.

"Eh?"

Muscles burst through his skin all over his body, and blood flew all around.

Why? The reason was something Ikki realized instantly. It was simple. Edelweiss had done exactly what Ikki was about to do—with a speed and destructive power an order of magnitude greater.

As a result, the shock wave Ikki was launching at Edelweiss had been completely extinguished, and the waves that remained had

conversely destroyed Ikki's body instead.

Ikki had intended to see through Edelweiss's sword. But all of that was an illusion. All he saw was what Edelweiss wanted to show. Everything had been in the palm of her hand all along.

This reality made Ikki's body shake in cold fear.

To this… degree…?

Exhausting all his strength, betting on all his techniques, using the best tactics he could devise—he couldn't even touch her.

The world's summit… is this high… this far away…!?

Before such strength that his own scale could not measure, Ikki felt terror.

And in the next instant, the end came. Against Ikki who had lost all methods of attack, Edelweiss swung the sword in her right hand—the white blade flew invisibly, broke through the blade of Intetsu, and sliced into Ikki.

"Ah."

From that one blow, the wound Ikki received was not deep. However, because the Device crystallized from his own soul had been shattered, Ikki's consciousness and body crumbled down.

Edelweiss did not give the final blow. He understood that there was no need for it. Having ended the fight, she turned her gaze away from Ikki—

"UuuaaaAAAAAAA!!!"

But at the moment Ikki's body would've hit the ground, incredibly, Ikki mustered as much of his strength as he could, and refused that last act. Grabbing a piece of *Intetsu* that was flying through the air—

"Aaaaahhh!"

He slashed at Edelweiss again.

That broken edge was easily blocked by the pure-white blade.

"…You still wish to continue?"

Ikki's action had made Edelweiss's heart waver just a little. She asked the knight who was now breathing over her shoulder, yet still grasping the broken shard of his crystallized soul.

"It is plain to see that with the difference in our strength, you cannot even hope to win by chance. The sword formed from your soul is broken, your consciousness faint. You body can no longer fight either. Despite that, why do you hinder me? I have no desire to injure children unreasonably. Since the beginning, I had no intention of killing you or your sister. Compared to keeping me here, you are putting your little sister in danger. Lord Wallenstein is not one to show children mercy, I fear. …Do you not also know this?"

At that question, Ikki nodded while breathing heavily.

"Yes… I know…. You're a kind person."

"If so, why?"

"…Because Shizuku doesn't want that."

Ikki, keeping himself awake with pure will, stared back at Edelweiss through his blurred eyes and answered with the reason that he had not yet surrendered.

"If I let you go… maybe Shizuku will be saved. But Alice won't be!"

"—That boy is a criminal, a member of society's underworld. Such a fate is inevitable."

"Maybe so. But Shizuku doesn't want that. She came here because she doesn't want that! And I promised to follow what Shizuku wanted!"

Therefore—

"Even if I die, I won't surrender here!"

At that answer, Edelweiss's noble face turned in confusion.

"Even if you die? You don't hold your life so cheaply, do you? Having cross blades with you, I know how strong the ambition and longing is inside of you. You too have a dream. You too have someone important. Despite that, you don't mind losing your life here?"

At the perplexed question, Ikki returned a weak smile.

"This is… the first time."

"First?"

"Yes… the first. That Shizuku has depended on me."

Ikki spoke as he thought back on his relationship with Shizuku.

"I've always been worried about it. As an older brother, I've never done anything for her. Yet that girl was always idolizing and loving me as her older brother. And today, my little sister has something she wishes for, and is relying on me."

To this useless older brother, she had entrusted her hopes.

"That's all the reason I need to risk my life…!"

That was why he wouldn't surrender. Not here. He wouldn't surrender here. The one wish of his good little sister, who did impious things but always supported him. If he didn't put his life on the line here, what kind of brother was he!?

"With my weakness, I'll hold your strength here!"

As long as he was alive, he would not let her leave. Holding this strong will and resolve, Ikki stood in Edelweiss's way. And

Edelweiss could see that resolve shining in his eyes.

What strong will. Are these the eyes of a boy who's only just had his coming of age?

Her breath was taken away. Such strength, such ambition. And not only that, but the noble spirit to risk his life for the sake of others.

It's been a long time, hasn't it? That I've met a person as beautiful as this.

"Young man. May I have your name?"

"…Ikki Kurogane."

"Kurogane—I will apologize for my impoliteness up until now. Young warrior."

Declaring this, Edelweiss leaped backwards lightly.

Opening a wide distance between herself and Ikki—

"You are not a child who needs to be protected. You are a man capable of witnessing my full strength as a knight. So… with the strongest sword in the world, I will slay a knight such as you."

For the first time this night, the world's strongest swordsman was serious. At that moment, a sword spirit that couldn't be compared to anything up until now poured out from Edelweiss's body. And similarly, a storm of light. Dust roiled up, and the trees creaked, and every glass window broke into tiny pieces.

A single human. While a presence unimaginably huge for a human body's dimensions spread forth, Twin-Wings Edelweiss spread the blades in both hands like wings—

"Prepare yourself."

—and soared.

Not as a child who should be protected, but as a knight whom she should show gratitude, she was aiming at one she recognized as an enemy. In order to sever that enemy's life absolutely—!

Just before things had become complicated, Ikki had certainly felt it. The footsteps of the reaper. The presence of a sharp sword that would cut away his future. If he defended, he would die—

But be that as it may, now was not like the situation then. It was different from the fight before, where he could underestimate his opponent or retreat. The forward speed of Edelweiss in seriousness could not be compared to that. To say nothing of swordsmanship, this was already to the point where Edelweiss's form had changed to light itself—

And with no sound, it all flickered for a moment before passing. Belatedly, a spray of blood flew in the darkness. Ikki Kurogane had no time to utter a sound—this time, he fell.

Part 9

If her judgment had been a moment late, her life would've been lost. At this truth, Shizuku gasped.

If Alice hadn't cried out, it really would've been dangerous.

An arm had been taken.

"Kuh…."

From the middle of the upper arm, her entire left arm had been cut away. From that perspective, the numbing pain crept up to her brain.

However, there was no room to cry in pain. The enemy before her eyes was preparing another one of the attacks had entirely cut through her fortification of ice and even taken her left arm.

"Hyakuya Kekkai!"

"Hmm!?"

Shizuku's decision in response was appropriate: promptly raising a screen of mist over the surroundings and disappearing from Wallenstein's field of view. And in the gap of Wallenstein losing sight of her, she froze shut the bleeding wound of her left arm—and ran.

Darting around Wallenstein, going to the place that was hidden by Hyakuya Kekkai, the sole place that wasn't perforated by the bullets of Keppu San'u. Where Arisuin was.

A slash that cuts through any kind of protection. A defense that lets him walk calmly even in the middle of a barrage. And a stride that was unaffected by Toudo Heigen.

If that man's ability is as I expected, it would be the highest among abilities.

She could not fight him directly. Therefore Shizuku chose to take Arisuin and escape.

But—

"Scampering about… how insolent."

Together with those words, Wallenstein planted his sword into the floor as he stood in the mist.

"Ugh…!?"

Shizuku lost her footing and tumbled down, as if dizzy. She wanted to get up immediately, but no matter how many times she tried, her feet slipped.

I can't get up…!?

Was she unable to stand upon the ice that she had made with Toudo Heigen? No. Toudo Heigen was Shizuku's own ability. That power could not hinder Shizuku's movements. All the more given Shizuku's command of magic power.

Then why? —There was one answer. There was another power in action.

"This is…!"

There was no doubt. Shizuku was sure that her hunch was the truth, and asked Wallenstein who was slowing coming into view through the mist.

"You made the ground lose friction, didn't you…!?"

"What a fast realization. That's quite correct."

Wallenstein answered as he slowly walked up to Shizuku.

"Blocking, slashing, shooting. In this world, the effect of every type

of power is greatly related to friction. No matter how fast the bullet, if its speed is stolen by friction at the point of impact, it would have no penetration and fall uselessly at its target's feet. And if an attack was altered by the same power, a blade can be made to unparalleled sharpness that cuts through any material without resistance."

A sword of excellent offense. A shield of divine defense. It was power that manipulated friction, which makes up the foundation of every kind of force.

"—That is the ability that I, the One-Armed Swordsman Wallenstein, possess."

And Wallenstein finally stood before Shizuku.

"Sh-Shizuku! Run awayyyyy!"

Before the eyes of the screaming Arisuin—

He cut the silver-haired girl at the waist, splitting her in two.

"Ah—"

With a thump, the upper body cut at the waist fell to the frozen floor. Spraying an immense quantity of blood and entrails. At that hopeless sight,

"NOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Arisuin's cry shook the air.

Part 10

Edelweiss brought Ikki Kurogane down with a single cut.

The expression of the winner… was dyed in astonishment. What she thought back on was the instant of conclusion. The unbelievable incident that developed amidst the entanglement that shined as if with light.

In that instant, Ikki Kurogane had, in front of the world's strongest sword—of all things, he had attacked on his own accord.

Until now, it could not be said that she, the world's strongest, went easy or acted the slightest bit hesitant while using the sword. Becoming serious, she had charged deep in order to take Ikki's life, but he had driven the blade infused with his soul into the needle-thin gap.

To the end, he had been trying to win against her. Against that edge, Edelweiss had been forced to protect herself completely, and as a result—her attack had faltered. A single step had rendered her fatal blow useless.

And so, Edelweiss had not slayed Ikki Kurogane's spirit.

Furthermore, that last bit of swordsmanship he showed was unmistakably—….

"…Amazing. I never thought it would be to this degree."

Edelweiss stood beside Ikki who had collapsed, and held her pure-white blade to his throat.

And she smiled slightly.

"If I lay my hand on you as you lie there, it would be me who loses

face, wouldn't it?"

At that moment.

"K-Kurogane!"

She turned her gaze toward the voice—

"…Isn't that World Clock?"

"Edelweiss, you bitch—!"

Kurono Shinguuji, the World Clock, had jumped over the wall, and sighted Ikki's bloody and fallen form. Pulling out her Device, a pair of one-white-one-black handguns in anger, she turned the muzzles toward Edelweiss.

"Calm yourself."

At the instant Edelweiss was going to be shot between in the eyes, the fingers on the trigger were frozen in place. It was as if Kurono's heart had exploded from fear. She had landed on the ground, and only just barely pointed the gun barrels, but even so her fingers didn't move.

What was stopping her was none other than Kurono's own instincts. Because if she moved her fingers just a little, the battle was start instantly, and she knew she couldn't win this fight.

"You monster…."

"Even though it's been a long time since we last met, this is your greeting?"

Against Kurono on whose face an uneasy look was spreading, Edelweiss spoke with a cool countenance.

"Be at ease. He is still alive."

"I-Is that true!?"

"Even though I did not intend to spare him."

While smiling a bit bitterly, Edelweiss said this, and jumped silently. Again, she moved to the Akatsuki Academy school building rooftop she had started from.

"Wh-Where are you going!?"

"I'm leaving. After all, I was never really connected to all this in the first place."

Answering so, Edelweiss once again gazed on the young warrior who had faced her. And she thought on the scope of the tribulations he would probably face in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival that was about to start. She was not directly involved in the plan, but she knew the rough outline of it.

Most likely, you will learn of it personally.

The fated coming battle. What lies in front of Ikki Kurogane was not just the Sword Emperor of Wind and the Crimson Princess.

Before long, Amane Shinomiya will stand in your way.

And that fight will probably be harsh beyond imagining. Even more than the fight against herself. Thinking this—

"World Clock. If Kurogane wakes, please tell him this for me."

Edelweiss left these words for the Worst One.

"The next time we meet, I hope you will be a worthy opponent."

And just as silently, the world's strongest swordsman disappeared into the night.

"I'll definitely tell him."

Replying like this to the empty air where Edelweiss had been, Kurono rushed over to the fallen Ikki. Though he had certainly

suffered severely… there was not a fatal wound. He could be saved. Knowing this, Kurono felt profound relief.

"Superb. To face that Edelweiss and still come back alive—"

And when she used her powers over time to plug his wounds—

"…Eh?"

Kurono saw something she couldn't believe at the edge of her peripheral vision.

It was where Edelweiss had been standing just a while ago. Upon the white concrete. What remained there was—red spots.

They were only a few drops, but without a doubt, they were bloodstains. They didn't come from Ikki, but from the one who had been standing there seconds ago. What that meant was—

He wounded her!? A kid who just came of age, against the world's highest…!?

Indeed. He had reached her.

Just a few drops. It was so shallow that one couldn't really call it a wound—even so, the sword of the Worst One had definitely left proof on the world's highest.

"Ha ha ha. …What is this, you just keep on surprising me."

With full delight and surprise, Kurono's entire body shook in excitement.

"…Sheesh. What an ominous boy."

After that, Kurono immediately began to treat Ikki's wounds. In doing so, she reassessed the situation.

Kurono and Nene. When the two of them arrived at Hagun, no one had been there with the exception of the Hagun students who lost consciousness. Therefore with Kurono's ability, they had reviewed what transpired in that place, and Nene had gone after Stella and

the others, but Kurono had taken on the task of rescuing Ikki and Shizuku.

And only Ikki was found here. Where were Shizuku and Arisuin? Kurono sharpened her senses, and searched for magic power in the surroundings.

And—she found them.

"This is…!"

Directly below—deep under her feet, something unbelievable had happened.

Part 11

…Oh, I'm….

The consciousness of Shizuku, who had been blown away by a tremendous impact as if her entire body had been struck by lightning, slowly came back. Heavy eyelids lifted, and she saw what was in front of her.

Ali…ce….

Shizuku looked up. Arisuin's face was there, upside down in her field of view. Though he was saying something with tears flowing down his desperate-looking face, Shizuku couldn't hear anything.

Suddenly, she felt a sense of discomfort, and Shizuku turned her gaze downward.

And she realized it. The lower half of her body was gone. That made her remember at last.

Ahh, I… was cut….

Did she wake up? The feeling in her body was coming back. Because of that, there was a great sense of loss.

My lower body. That and most of my innards are gone.

The entire section had probably fallen out. It was undoubtedly a fatal wound. Shizuku was able to realize that she would likely die in a few seconds.

It's frustrating, huh?

Again. She hadn't been able to win. Just like in the fight against Raikiri. Not being able to control the distance during a magic battle,

and just defeated by a sword cut.

I'm… so weak….

Against another truly strong opponent, she didn't have the power to keep the adversary away. Realizing this so thoroughly, Shizuku recalled her bitterness.

If I die… Onii-sama would be sad….

He would probably be sad. Not just her brother, but Stella and Arisuin, and everyone else—right now, there were many kind people around her. They would probably grieve even for someone with such bad character and low cuteness. That scene clearly came to mind. So she thought—this was… not what she wanted.

—In that case, I should give it another try, right?

After losing to Raikiri, she had always been thinking. With her power, she was always losing against the sword. And she couldn't do anything about that. With her small, powerless body, it was impossible to control a close-range battle. She couldn't help that. And she could only think of one way to make up for that weakness.

It was something tremendously risky, so she hadn't been able to try it until now, but—at any rate, she was going to die in a few seconds even if she didn't use it. She didn't want to leave something untried.

I can, if I'll put everything into it—

Just like her esteemed older brother was always doing. She would believe in her own strength. Resolving herself, Shizuku closed her eyes. And—

Part 12

"Shizuku… Shizuku…."

Arisuin held Shizuku's fallen body close. A gurgling sound was coming from her wound, while blood and viscera were spilling out rapidly. Her weight. Her life. Sensing that they were fading, Arisuin's view grew dark. Once again, feeling the loss of a little sister he had cherished and wanted to protect, all of his emotions were paling away to nothing. Rage at his own helplessness. Anger at the man who had stolen Shizuku's life. All of them, he couldn't feel anything anymore. He didn't even have the will to cry out.

"This is the reality that have tried to avert your eyes from."

From behind him, Wallenstein's voice came.

"Only power is true. Even though I taught you this, and pulled you to the side of the strong. If you can't even understand this, you are beyond saving."

A dumbfounded voice. Disappointment at a personal disciple who was embracing Shizuku's body, even though it had already become nothing but a corpse.

"I have no need for an assassin who develops feelings for his target. Die."

The sound of wind being cut behind him hit Arisuin's ears. It was probably the sound of Wallenstein raising his sword. Arisuin didn't think of protecting himself. Instead, he thought of peace arriving soon. At this time, the weight of Shizuku in his arms was disappearing steadily. Because he knew he wouldn't recover it again, he didn't have any feelings about the defeat.

Steadily, steadily, the petite body was getting lighter.

Steadily, steadily, the weight he could feel in his arms was disappearing–

Eh…!?

There, Arisuin finally noticed something unfathomable.

The weight was disappearing to the point where he couldn't feel it? That was impossible. Even if all the blood and viscera fell out, the muscles and bones in the human body would still remain. That sense of displacement shined a light into the darkness of Arisuin's view. He looked down on what was in his hands. There, the remains of Shizuku's body was–

–gone. Leaving only her clothes.

And the next moment–

"It's okay, Alice."

Shizuku's voice echoed with dignity through the underground training arena.

"...Eh!?"

"Wh-What!?"

In astonishment, Arisuin and Wallenstein scanned for Shizuku in the surroundings. However, Shizuku wasn't found anywhere. No, on the contrary, even the blood and entrails that had been scattered just a while ago had also vanished.

"Wh-What is this!? What did you do!?"

At the situation that was moving too far beyond comprehension, Wallenstein cried out in confusion. And amidst the confusion of Wallenstein and Arisuin–Shizuku Kurogane appeared.

Appeared like a status formed of gathered mist, stark naked with unblemished body. And she opened her mouth to speak.

"It's okay–because I'll win."

"Shizuku, you're… alive?"

Arisuin stared at Shizuku as if she was a ghost. He hadn't taken in the situation yet. But beside him, Wallenstein–

"How can this be…!"

From his instincts born of many battles, he realized that there was only one way this situation was possible. And in order to make sure, he swung his sword at Shizuku who was standing before his eyes.

Shizuku, without moving to defend herself, received the attack on her body. A cut–Wallenstein's Device once again bisected Shizuku.

But this time no blood sprayed forth. There was no response except a spray of mist, and though Shizuku's form had been split, it immediately returned to normal–seeing this, Wallenstein was convinced.

"Y-You little rat…! You changed your own body to vapor!?"

In response, the mouth on Shizuku's flickering form curved slightly.

"Ha ha ha. As I thought, you're not just that old for show, right mister?"

Shizuku confirmed it with a sadistic sneer. Indeed. That was the true nature of how Shizuku had survived.

"I was defeated in the selection battles by Raikiri, so I've always been thinking."

–That though she had skill, she lacked determination. When facing opposition, there was nothing she could do but take a fatal wound–then how should she deal with it?

"I thought and thought… and suddenly, I hit upon an answer. Ahh, that's right. I take damage because I have a body of flesh."

In that case, she would remove that premise. In doing so, this technique was created. An aspect of water magic, an application of healing techniques for the human body, a Noble Art that disintegrates her own body into mist and dust to the point where slashes and strikes no longer affect her and then voluntarily reconstructing it–

"*Aoiro Rinne*[7]–I've come up with an amazing technique, right?"

Shizuku spoke with a face that was slightly boastful. At Shizuku's explanation, Wallenstein became more and more pale.

"Come… up with it!? Do you know what you've done to yourself? Do you understand it!?"

Wallenstein's discomposure was natural. Because although Aoiro Rinne was temporary, it was a technique that severs one's own life.

"With a top-class magic control, you can reconstruct something, but it's impossible to do so after dying…! No, even if you could do it, if you make the slightest error in reconstituting the trillions of cells in the human body, I don't even know how difficult it would be…! To use that kind of power on your own body…! Are you sane, you little…!?"

Certainly there was great merit in overriding the physics of an attack. But to do so, an overly powerful technique was necessary. The burden of risk was too great. Therefore to Wallenstein in his consternation, Shizuku–

"I'm plenty sane. If it's me, it can be done, I believed."

–declared so, as if it was nothing.

At those words, Wallenstein was convinced. He had obtained information about Hagun in advance, but he had only judged Stella Vermillion as an opponent worthy of attention. But he had overlooked someone. The Lorelei, who was right under his nose, was like Stella someone very different from the masses. A prodigy beyond the pale.

What an embarrassing oversight…. But I haven't lost yet–"

Wallenstein said so, and took up his stance again. But–

"Oh? Could it be you're thinking of fighting me again, I wonder?"

–with a laugh, Shizuku smiled on him as if scoffing.

"What did you say–!?"

At that instant, Wallenstein who had recovered from his attack on Aoiro Rinne noticed something about himself.

"*Cough cough*… gah…!?"

The air he was exhaling was not returning as inhales. His lungs could not be filled with air. As if he was drowning–yes, he was on the verge of drowning.

"If the lungs are turned to water balloons, humans would become like this, right? As I expected of this technique, it's not something other people at school can possibly do, so it's the first time you've seen it."

Shizuku who was using Aoiro Rinne like this had turned all the atmosphere in the whole place the same way. Therefore, she could establish control over all of it–including the air that Wallenstein was breathing.

Wallenstein's ability to control friction certainly was an unparalleled power pertaining to external slashes and strikes. However–

"If it's inside the body, there's nothing friction can do, am I right?"

"Gah… ukk…!"

Wallenstein, drowning in an invisible sea, finally couldn't keep standing and fell to the floor with his eyes wide and his mouth opening and closing like a fish washed up on shore desperately seeking oxygen.

"Hmm? What's that? What did you say?"

"S…Sp–Spare… me!"

"Oh, you want me to let you go?"

It was actually a declaration of surrender. Wallenstein had decided that winning fight was impossible at this point, and was waving the white flag at Shizuku.

"But I won't."

Shizuku gave a merciless smile, and snapped her fingers. At that moment, blood flew from Wallenstein's entire body.

"–GAAAAHHH!"

Flesh tore from inside his body, and dozens of ice spears erupted from within him. That attack completely severed the consciousness of the One-Armed Swordsman. Wallenstein, while discharging blood mixed with water from his mouth, fainted.

And Shizuku lowered her cold gaze on her opponent as if he was trash.

"I'm not as nice as Onii-sama, or as gentle as Stella-san, so I can't help but cut an enemy who attacked me to shreds. –You chose the wrong foe."

She tore Wallenstein's overcoat off of him. With it she covered her own skin, and turned her gaze away. She had already lost interest.

In this way, the fight between the One-Armed Swordsman and Lorelei came to a close.

Part 13

"As long as I try, I can do it somehow or other, right? I'm not something to disregard so easily."

Reconstructing her flesh, Shizuku checked her sense of touch by opening and closing her hand. There was no discomfort in that feeling. It seemed the reconstruction magic had functioned properly.

However, it wasn't like there was no problems at all.

"…The mental exertion was too much. I feel kind of sick."

After processing excessively high-level magic, her head was screaming. The agony as if her cranium was churning made Shizuku aware of her own lack of skill. It seemed it would be best to refrain from reckless magic for a while.

To Shizuku who had checked her own condition in that way– Arisuin asked with a face covered in wonder.

"Shizuku… you're really alive?"

"Oh stop it. You're looking at me like I'm a monster."

Shizuku pouted in ill humor.

But Arisuin wanting to ask was understandable, because Shizuku's act had been a miracle.

"At any rate, I thought Aoiro Rinne out well, but having my clothes slip off every time is a problem, right? I don't want to show myself like this to anyone besides Onii-sama."

However, at seeing Shizuku who was in all respects the same as

usual, relief had surpassed astonishment.

"…Ha ha ha. Yes, it's true. You're really alive. Thank goodness."

Arisuin fell onto his back in this place, and with tears flowing down at the truth before his eyes, he rejoiced.

"Really, thank goodness…."

But to Arisuin–

"That's what I should be saying."

Shizuku's lips drew sharp in discontent–and kneeling down, she embraced his head. Tenderly, affectionately.

"I… thought you might have already been killed."

"Sh-Shizuku…."

"Sheesh. Don't make worry like that…big sister."

Shizuku rejoiced at his safety with a voice just slightly trembling. That trembling voice–jolted Arisuin deep inside, and the emotions that had grown cold in his head a while ago, heated up once again. Suddenly, what came to mind was the frightened expressions of his little sisters at seeing his blood-soaked body. Seeing that, he had thought he couldn't remain with them any longer. He, a murderer, must not stay with them. And surely, he thought, Shizuku would look at him with the same eyes. He had convinced himself of that on his own. Even Shizuku, wouldn't want to stay at his side, probably.

But… but…. But if Shizuku was still calling him "big sister"–

"Can I… stay by your side again… I wonder…?"

"Are you attaching yourself to me just because it's what you think I want?"

The head that was being held shook in denial. That wasn't the case. There was a bigger reason.

"Thank you… Shizuku…."

"Then we're even, right?"

While giggling, Shizuku coughed those words. Arisuin quickly realized what those words meant–now that she mentioned it, there was the time he had hugged Shizuku after she had lost to Raikiri, wasn't there?

"…Really."

Becoming strangely happy at sharing something so trivial, Arisuin also returned a smile–and he swore in his heart.

He would not betray her again. He would stay with this girl to the end. And he would protect her and the ones important to her. After all, they were precious to this incredibly sweet girl–

He would change himself, and continue to uphold this desire, because he wanted to become a proud human being.

Part 14

What Kurono had felt was the movement of a bizarre magic power that she had never experienced before. That magic power that Shizuku Kurogane had become was subtle to the point that one couldn't detect it, but the span of it was wide, and its movement in converging back into human form again was erratic.

Why did that movement happen? Kurono, who knew Shizuku's magic power, guessed right away.

"She decomposed herself and then reconstructed?"

That unbelievable resuscitation was an amazing miracle.

"…Sheesh. First the brother, then the sister? What an outrageous pair of siblings."

Coughing in astonishment, Kurono scanned even more precisely the situation underground. Seeing the degree of response to magic power, it appeared that the enemy had already been silenced. It would probably be fine to pass that off as a peripheral miracle. Feeling just a moment of relief at this–Kurono looked toward the western sky.

It turned out okay over here somehow, but what about over there? Nene–

Part 15

"*Black Blade □ Yatagarasu*[8]–"

"*Kusanagi*–!"

A magic blade of lightning darker than night crashed into a sword of tornado winds, and the two knights wielding them were both repelled backward. While losing his footing on the gravel mountain path, the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane clicked his tongue.

"As I thought, the power drops by the third usage."

On the other side, the petite woman fighting against him who was dancing back through the air, the Yaksha Princess Nene Saikyou turned gracefully in midair, and dropped down in front of the Hagure sisters who had been cornered upon the deserted mountain.

"Sensei!"

"It looks like I got here just in time~"

"**Sniffle** We're saved…."

"Ahh. You've really been holding on. It's okay now."

After confirming the two of them and the fainted Stella were safe, Saikyou felt a moment of relief, and–

"Nooooow then…."

–immediately faced back toward the enemy in front of her. Akatsuki Academy–at the only one she recognized among them, Saikyou made a declaration.

"Haven't seen you since your grade school days, right? Ouma-chan. You really became huge."

"And you haven't grown at all."

"That's none of your business–anyway, I want to teach you a lesson right now, but what's the meaning of all this fooling around? Talk, and I'll hear you out, okay?"

Saikyou spread her weapon, an iron fan, and asked Ouma while concealing her lips behind it.

But the one who answered was Amane, who was standing behind Ouma in reserve. He, with a peculiar smile that could be described as simple-minded, answered Saikyou's question.

"Instead of chatting, how about negotiating you handing over those three people to us instead?"

In an instant.

"Ha ha. Negotiating. Is that what you said–little boy?"

The air hardened with a **crack**.

"Don't try to play make-believe with an adult, brat."

Every one of Akatsuki's members was assaulted by weight. No, not just Akatsuki. With Saikyou at the center, everything within twenty meters was being crushed into the ground by an invisible force. It was Saikyou's Noble Art that used gravity, *Jibakujin*[9]. Akatsuki, who had suddenly been struck by gravity making them ten times as heavy as normal, all collapsed onto the ground as if they were

sinking into it.

Except for only one person, Ouma Kurogane, who stood upright and faced Saikyou without moving even an eyebrow. Ouma slowly turned *Ryuuzume* toward Saikyou, and Saikyou also once again charged a pure and enormous gravitational energy into the twin iron fans she had materialized, having it take the form of the blade called Black Sword □ Yatagarasu–

"Ah, stop stop! Please hold on a second!"

Between the two of them, the inappropriately-dressed Pierrot Reisen Hiraga interrupted. After delivering Arisuin to Wallenstein, he had immediately turned around and just barely managed to catch up with his compatriots, and–

"Everyone, please withdraw. We don't need those three."

–he urged Akatsuki to retreat.

"–Is that alright?"

"Yes. Well, we've probably made enough of an impact, and more than anything else, if the Yaksha Princess is our opponent then there's too high a risk. If the Yaksha Princess seriously went on a rampage, Ouma-kun might be fine, but I don't think the other members will escape unscathed. And our sponsor doesn't want us beaten before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. So let's escape here somehow."

"…Hmph."

At those words, Ouma sheathed his sword in boredom.

"Yaksha Princess, this wouldn't be a problem, right?"

Saikyou, who had been asked–spent a moment in silence, then returned her twin iron fans to her kimono sleeves. There were too many enemies. Fighting by herself was one thing, but she knew she had to ensure the safety of the students behind her. It was the duty of a teacher to protect the students. Since that was the case, she had no reason reject the proposal.

"–Be glad I happen to be a teacher, you shitty brats."

"We appreciate your understanding."

And like that, the strife starting from the Hagun Academy attack on the eve of the Festival came to an end.

All Akatsuki, beginning with Reisen Hiraga, disappeared into the darkness without looking at the Hagure sisters and Stella. On the mountain path, there was nothing more than the sound of the wind passing through the trees.

"–Sponsor, huh?"

Within that, Saikyou ruminated on Hiraga's words, and looked up to the sky with a bitter face.

"These guys seem like they'll become awfully troublesome, Kuu-chan."

References

1. ↑ *King's Pressure*: This uses the kanji 獣王の威圧, *Juu-Ou no Iatsu* ("Beast King's Coercion).
2. ↑ *Takemikazuchi*: A Japanese god of thunder and sword.
3. ↑ *Tokaido Shinkansen*: The Japanese bullet train line between Tokyo and Osaka, named after the historic Tokaido route which travels along the sea coast.
4. ↑ *Keppu San'u*: "Hideous Rain of Blood and Wind"
5. ↑ *Bergschneiden*: "Mountain Cut", in German. This uses the kanji *Yamakiri*, 山斬り ("Mountain Cutter").
6. ↑ *Dokuga no Tachi*, 毒蛾ノ太刀: "Poison Moth Longsword"
7. ↑ *Aoiro Rinne*, 青色輪廻: "Blue Reincarnation"
8. ↑ *Yatagarasu*: A black bird of enormous wingspan from Japanese mythology, symbolizing divine intervention.
9. ↑ *Jibakujin*, 地縛陣: "Earthbind Formation"

Epilogue: Fixer

Part 1

Regarding the raid on Hagun Academy by Akatsuki Academy, a video recording of the Hagun Academy buildings burning immediately became a news headline across the nation. Against the terrorists who called themselves Akatsuki Academy and perpetrated this unprecedented brutality, the steering committee of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival immediately began both the process of revoking Akatsuki Academy's student knight qualifications and considering a severe liability investigation. Condemning them more rigorously than anyone else, arresting them, censuring them. It was natural to believe that they would not be allowed to participated in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

But–when the person who called himself Akatsuki Academy's board chairman appeared, the situation changed completely. The name of the middle-aged man who named himself Akatsuki Academy's board chairman and revealed himself to the media was–Bakuga Tsukikage. He was the current prime minister, in other words the chief executive of the nation of Japan.

In the liability investigation, he did not apologize. On the contrary–he said this with a refreshing smile.

"It's magnificent, don't you agree? How surprising. An academy attached to the League wasn't even a worthy opponent for them. That's the strength of Japan's national Akatsuki Academy, who will replace the Seven Stars, the dogs of the League!"

And he declared his purpose: to have the national Akatsuki Academy conquer the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, to have the Blazer-training system dominated by the League of Mage-Knight Nations rendered obsolete, and to have Japan regain its supremacy.

After that speech, the situation started to develop in a direction that no one had imagined. The police, the justice system, they took absolutely no action against Akatsuki Academy's brutality. On the contrary, they asserted 「It is a false report that Hagun Academy was attacked. In reality, it was only an accident during a mutually agreed-upon practice match.」 and began to pass this off as the truth.

Generally, this was an unacceptable assertion, but if the government insisted it was so, it was easy for the public to become confused. Of course the seven schools starting with Hagun Academy, as well as the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival steering committee, were infuriated. They immediately moved to suspend the right of Akatsuki Academy's students to appear at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

But this action was not executed. A directive came from the League of Mage-Knight Nations headquarters. Regarding the training of Japan's Blazers, an outrage like this could not be ignored. Therefore, Akatsuki Academy must be destroyed at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, and the correctness of the League of Mage-Knight Nations must be displayed publicly.

Everything–had occurred exactly as Hiraga described. The enemy had been lurking behind the scenes, but the enemy was the country itself, and moreover the League headquarters was the one to give such an order, so the people in charge of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival steering committee and the seven schools could not do anything at all. In the end, their claim had ended with a whimper, and Akatsuki Academy took the reputation and degree of attention as a collection of powerful up-and-comers who drove Hagun Academy to half-destruction with only seven people, and formally entered the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival as the eighth school.

Part 2

"I'm sorry."

Speaking of the circumstances of the attack on Hagun, Kurono apologized to Ikki and Shizuku for her own powerlessness. In response, Ikki begged Kurono to raise her head.

"No, there's no reason for you to apologize, Chairman."

"Yes. But it's astonishing, isn't it? …That that was such a thing hidden out of sight in this country."

"It's been smoldering ever since the end of the second world war."

Kurono said so to Shizuku's muttered statement.

From the start, the country's unification could never be called peaceful. After the second world war, the public's weariness toward war made it convenient to halt the Prime Minister's reckless imperialism, and to progress toward world harmony by giving up territory. Japan's entry into the League of Mage-Knight Nations was a step in carrying that plan out.

"However, it was an act that relinquished the privileges of a powerful nation. Naturally, there were very many dissenting voices, and bloody political strife arose. Even though the Prime Minister at the time forced the country to move toward international harmony, the discord from that era still remains even now. There were people who believed Japan had the power to remain a major country without joining the likes of Russia and America. There were those who thought about reforming. And as far as it goes, there were many who thought it a problem that training and disciplining Blazers without the League of Mage-Knight Nations approval would be disallowed–these people had a great deal of influence pushing against creating a branch of the League."

"Even to create a League branch?"

"From the beginning, the League branch that we have now was formerly a bureau of warriors from back when Blazers were called samurai, an army corps of Blazers directly controlled by the Japanese government, now detached from the government with nothing more than a change of names. The relationship we have with the League branch that snatched our authority can't be described as good. Well, because this was also to force us along the path of international cooperation, there would be strain. And the anti-League view was also held by parts of the public."

The portion of them that were extremists were special, but the anti-League claim that it would be strange for the nation's own soldiers to be trained in a system created by foreigners was pretty logical. But then, because there were those who would stand to gain from the League's favor, it was hard to say who was correct–

"…Like that, the public opinion was pushed for half a century and that influence expanded into the ruling party of government we have today, but it may be inevitable that the incident this time would happen."

"In short, Prime Minister Tsukikage's scheme was to demonstrate his own accomplishments at where the League hold the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. He shows his accomplishments directly, and takes away the League's authority to educate Blazers, basically?"

"That's still an optimistic conjecture. At worst, his goal may be to sever relations with the League completely."

"Isn't there a problem with Akatsuki Academy's training program coming from Rebellion, the terrorist group?"

"The only evidence that Akatsuki Academy's students are members of Rebellion is Arisuin's testimony, after all. If they just feign ignorance and honesty, there's nothing we can do. Even if for argument's sake definite proof came out, the government would use all of its power to suppress it. Just like with the attack on Hagun."

While letting out a sigh, Kurono took out a cigarette.

"But I still can't believe it. That Tsukikage-sensei would do something like this…."

She groaned with a bitter face.

"Sensei, you're acquainted with Prime Minister Tsukikage?"

"He was the board chairman of Hagun Academy back when I attended here. I remember him as an intellectual, rational, and very respectable person, but… what happened to him after he became a politician?"

While expressing doubt, she lit her cigarette. The ashtray on her work desk was stabbed so full of used cigarettes it looked like a sea urchin. It was probably in proportion to her irritation.

"Anyway, it's already been formally decided that Akatsuki Academy will appear in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. They're all elites of the underworld. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival will be completely different from normal. Therefore the teachers are thinking of allowing the students to decide not to participate. This means you get to decide whether you still want to show up."

"Is that how it is?"

Ikki finally understood why he had been called to the board chairman's office.

"Arisuin and Toutokubara, as well as the Hagure sisters, have already withdrawn. Arisuin felt he was a liability, as expected. I hear Toutokubara is staying by the side of Touka, who still hasn't regained consciousness. As for Kikyou and Botan Hagure, it seems their confidence was broken after witnessing Akatsuki's strength."

"…I… see. I guess it can't be helped, huh?"

"What are you going to do? Given the circumstances this time, I'll make an exception regarding my promise with you–"

"No, there's no problem at all."

Ikki interrupted what Kurono was about to say, because he didn't need the concession she was making. Ikki had already decided in his heart.

"I will participate in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. The promise can stay as it is."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. In the first place, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival this year didn't seem normal to me. At a festival where only legitimate knights usually appeared, powerful people from the criminal underworld are intruding. That's all it is. Instead of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival being for deciding Japan's most powerful student knights, this year the Festival might not even be called a real Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

In that case–

"There's something I want. Regardless of what Prime Minister Tsukikage and those with him are thinking, it's not what we student knights are concerned about. As usual, I'm just heading for the place where I promised to fight fairly with Stella."

Answering with a strong voice, he made a face that was certainly resolved.

"…And besides, there's an opponent I'm a little worried about."

"The Sword Emperor of Wind?"

"No."

Ikki denied that immediately.

"I can't say I'm not worried about my brother Ouma, but there is someone else."

"More than the Sword Emperor of Wind? Who?"

"The representative originally from Kyomon Academy. Amane Shinomiya."

"Onii-sama, that's the boy with the extremely cute face?"

Ikki nodded in confirmation of Shizuku's inquiry. Kurono tilted her heard slightly in confusion at that confirmation.

"…I didn't see him as a knight who's particularly noteworthy, though."

"That's also what I think."

"What?"

"The ones related to this must have outstanding ambition like my brother Ouma. Among Akatsuki Academy's members, there are none who doesn't leave a special impression. And I think my impressions are basically right. His power as a knight isn't as great compared to the rest of Akatsuki Academy. …Despite that, for some reason I've always had a weird impression about him stuck in my chest. An unpleasant feeling that's strong enough to surprise even me–"

Why did he have such unpleasant feelings for no one other than Amane? Ikki didn't know himself. For that reason, he couldn't help but think it was ominous.

"Why am I repelled by Amane-san to this degree? I want to know."

He didn't understand right now, but there must be a reason. To Ikki's words, Kurono nodded in comprehension.

"…Certainly, you're not the type to look at others in disgust without reason, Kurogane. Maybe you're the only one who noticed something about this boy called Shinomiya. –Anyway, I understand your determination. I'll follow through with your participation at the tournament."

"Thank you very much."

Ikki stated his gratitude, and asked something that was on his mind.

"By the way, Chairman. Will… Stella also participate?"

In response, Kurono answered with a small laugh.

"If you asked her this morning, she would've immediately answered with 'Are you attached to me like moss?'"

"That answer seems very much like what Stella-san would say, Onii-sama."

"…I guess so."

At Shizuku's scolding words, Ikki nodded a bit in return.

"Ahh, I remembered because of that, but… Kurogane. She left a message for you. 'For the week up to the beginning of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, I won't come back to the dorm,' she said. And 'Just because I'm not there doesn't mean you should let Shizuku do what she wants!' as well."

"I decline."

Although Shizuku immediately replied to part of that message, she raised her eyes and looked at Ikki in confusion.

"But what does she mean, not coming back for a week?"

"–I wonder."

To Shizuku's question, Ikki thought back… to Stella's words as they went yesterday to visit Touka and Utakata who still had not woken up. She stared at the two sleepers from behind the glass window. And squeezing her fists hard enough to draw blood, she spoke with a trembling voice.

「I didn't know… that being weak… was as painful as this….」

"…I'm sure that Stella has also been thinking about many things."

Those remarks, those tears, they were probably not what Stella wished for. Therefore Ikki vaguely glossed over Shizuku's question.

"And so, Shizuku Kurogane. I have something important to discuss with you."

Suddenly, Kurono presented an issue to Shizuku who had been standing next to Ikki all this time.

"Yes, what is it?"

"The truth is, since Kanata Toutokubara, Nagi Arisuin, Kikyou Hagure, and Botan Hagure have now withdrawn from participating, I was going to offer you the right to appear in the tournament. You're the knight who took the only victory in this incident. There's no problem with your capability. If you're willing to accept this offer, I'll make it happen accordingly, so… what will you do?"

Shizuku's expression did not show surprise at the question. Perhaps Arisuin had already spoken to her about it before. Shizuku, without displaying any particular hesitation, returned a nod.

"Certainly, I gratefully accept the chance to participate."

"Then let's get that taken care of."

Saying so, Kurono wrote some words on documents she had near at hand, and affixed her seal. After that, she raised her face and informed Ikki and Shizuku who were standing in front of her. Showing a rather fearless smile, she said–

"This year, an impossibly abnormal disturbance broke out before we could react, but like Kurogane said before, there's no need for you to worry about the conspiracy of adults surrounding the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. The leading actors of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival are undoubtedly you student knights. This is a good chance to meet those people from Rebellion in combat where they can't fight in a way that breaks the rules. Whether in open society or in the criminal underworld, powerful people without such distinctions are gathering in this festival to decide who are truly Japan's strongest. Isn't it splendid? The highest and unparalleled stage. Test yourselves to your hearts' content, and enjoy yourselves to the limits of your strength!"

"We will!"

Part 3

At the same time, Stella Vermillion was standing in front of the gym in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area reserved for the exclusive use of King of Knights contenders. She was waiting for someone inside.

"Well well, I didn't think we would meet in this place."

The one who finally appeared was the Yaksha Princess, Nene Saikyou. This was an institution Saikyou used while she was staying at Hagun.

"I was waiting for you, Nene-sensei."

"Oh? So you're saying you have business with me, Princess?"

Guessing her intentions along those lines, Saikyou heard the important matter that Stella wanted to speak with her about. Stella's expression was extremely earnest–or perhaps over-worried–as she answered.

"For the week until the beginning of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, I ask that you train with me."

”Once again, what an abrupt thing to say. What brought this on?"

At the question, Stella bit her lips, and she answered with a strained voice.

"…Ever since I failed to get a decisive lead on Touka-san in mock battles during the training camp, I've been vaguely aware. But this time I really realized it."

The sensation of facing down Ouma's Kusanagi was still raw in Stella's hands. It was the first time she had experienced it, losing in strength at her own field of expertise: offense. The shock of that

defeat, along with Touka who had protected her still not having regained consciousness, had made Stella face reality.

"I… am weak. At this rate, I won't be able to join Ikki at the place we promised."

"So that's why you want me to train you?"

Stella nodded heavily.

"As far as I can see, you're the strongest at this academy, Nene-sensei! That's why I want to spend this last week training with you! Please!"

"…If I say no?"

Saikyou watched as Stella bowed her head deeply, and when Stella raised her head again quickly to respond–

"Sparks that fall onto everyone can't be brushed off, right?"

From within the hair hanging in front of her face, Stella stared at Saikyou with blazing eyes. If Saikyou didn't accompany Stella, Stella would force the issue. If Saikyou didn't agree here, Stella would immediately attack. That was what Stella's gaze was saying.

Acknowledging this, Saikyou sighed a bit inside.

I guess she's forced into a difficult situation, huh?

Saikyou recognized it. Today, Stella–was struggling. The experience she never had before of absolute defeat. The feeling she never had before of great helplessness. Frustration, bitterness, the pain of wanting to do something, anything, but not knowing what to do. That was probably why she was trying to do the most difficult thing she could do right now. Because if she's not doing something, if she doesn't do something, she would be crushed by anxiety.

Honestly, what she needs right now is something to calm her down, but….

Forcible training due to impatience and agitation would only be dangerous. There was nothing more important that telling her this clearly. The potential Stella had was too far in another dimension. Being brought down to the level of an ordinary person, hitting the ceiling on the ability of a prodigy who boasts of the world's greatest magic power, it had become a huge minus for Stella. Therefore, telling her to calm down was the best option for a teacher.

Yet–

…As expected, this needs a little compassion, huh?

Seeing Stella's expression strained to the point that she might break into tears at any moment, Saikyou thought. Certainly, looking at the long term, calming her down might be the best choice. Stella's potential undoubtedly stood above the rest. There was probably no one else from Hagun that could match the Sword Emperor of Wind. For Saikyou, it was easy to imagine the future.

But–that was in three years. Right now, the unease that Stella was feeling was an unmistakeable truth. In terms of this year's Seven Stars Sword-art Festival, it would probably be difficult for Stella as she was now to make it to the finals. Because Stella also understood this, she was asking what she could do.

You're the type with great talent, so… well, that's no reason why I should help, you know?

Recalling her own days as a student, Saikyou leaked out a wry smile from her innermost thoughts. When she herself had been young, she had made various idiotic requests in order to raise her strength and get results. When she went too far and forfeited that match by using deadly force against Kurono would be a good example. That time was really entirely similar to what was going on right now. Stella wasn't looking at the future. This girl was thinking that if she could win, it would be fine even if she died.

Youngsters have their own sense of values.

It might be the illogical thinking one would expect from the inexperienced and laughable. However, forcing youngsters who

only think this way into rational adults would be–

–Illogical, wouldn't it.…?

So Saikyou made a proposal.

"Hey, Stella-chan. I'll give a condition. If you can take it, then I'll train you."

"R-Really!? Then what's your condition!?"

"It's simple. I'll give you a crash course. However, I won't teach you a thing."

"Eh…?"

"In other words, Stella-chan, for the remaining week I'll do nothing but beat you up like a punching bag. Maybe your body will be broken, and maybe your heart will break before even that. I'll continue mercilessly knocking you around. If you're fine dancing along with that kind of training, I'll give it to you?"

"So you're saying in the meantime, I have to figure everything out myself?"

"Just so. Of course, I can't guarantee you'll figure anything about, but–what do you want to do?"

That was the best Saikyou could come up with. Show off her absolute strength. Make Stella realize her own powerlessness. However, Stella would have to find her own solution. If she couldn't, Saikyou wouldn't care. It was a proposal that a normal teacher wouldn't make, but–for Stella as she was now, it was more than attractive enough. In any case, the struggling Stella wanted a direction. For the sake of becoming stronger, some kind of impetus to advance a step. Because if she could find a way somehow like this, there was no way she would refuse.

"That's enough! Thank you very much!"

"Then come along. …For one week, I'll show you hell."

And so, all of the participants spent their last week in their own ways. Above and below the surface, both adults and children, all desires and ambitions swirled in a maelstrom and gathered, facing toward the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

And two days before the opening of the Festival, the tournament schedule was finally announced. Seeing the distributions in the tournament schedule, Ikki Kurogane's lips twisted in a smile.

Was he smiling in confidence? Or bitterness?

After the non-participants were removed, the final count was–thirty-two. Among the thirty-two names, the one given for Ikki's opponent in the opening match was–Bugyoku Academy third-year.

Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi.

The champion of last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. The man who at this moment was without a doubt standing at the top of Japan's student knights.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing volume four of *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan*. I'm the author, Riku Misora.

Was volume four enjoyable? In this volume, Ikki-kun was awfully unlucky, right?

- His older brother became the an errand-boy for a suspicious organization.
- He encountered a wild attacker in the street.
- He's now followed by a very queer fan who's a lot like the one from that Robert de Niro movie[1].
- At the first round of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, he'll have to fight the previous Festival's champion.

Generally, that would be miserable. Surely it would be like the heavens trying to kill him. Well, that's how his life is usually like, but his luck is F-rank too, right? It can't be helped.

For that reason, the fifth volume will have a showdown between him and the current Seven Stars Sword King who shut down Raikiri last year, Yuudai Moroboshi. Because I'm revving up to write for a climactic feeling from scratch, please certainly look forward to it!

By the way, it was announced in the book wrapper, but *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan* has finally started being made into a manga! For me, seeing my own work becoming a manga was a huge milestone, and I was very happy. The dream I couldn't achieve with *Danzai no Exceed* and *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai* has now come true! This is all due to all of you readers who supported this work! I'm truly grateful! This afterword is for catching the eye of all the readers, because the first issue of the manga was published due to people online making a great commotion, so the manga was realized due to the support of all the readers. I hope everyone

continues to follow it! I feel it can't be helped if we all look forward to it!

Finally, everyone of the editorial department who's always collaborating on revising the work, and Won-san who dived right into the new chapters and the huge amount of design work needed for the new characters, thank you very much. Because the images of Amane and Sara Bloodlily were so on the mark, I was greatly invigorated when I received them.

Also I would like to thank every reader who continued to support the work up through the fourth volume. If you continue to follow the story from the national arc that starts now all the way to the end of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, I'd be very happy.

Let's meet again in volume five.

References

1. ↑ *The Fan*, a 1996 film starring Robert De Niro as a knife salesman who stalks a baseball celebrity.